HYPODERMIC LIGHT: THE POETRY OF PHILIP LAMANTIA

AND THE QUESTION OF SURREALISM

"The German observer is not standing at the head of the stream. That is his opportunity. He is in the valley." Walter Benjamin, *Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia.*

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INTRODUCTION

He [Philip Lamantia] has an incomparable European reputation
but is not well known in America....You know, he is off someplace.
He is in Mexico, or he is in Tangiers, or he is in Spain, Paris,
and he is ignored by the American avant-garde establishment.
Yet everybody knows...they all acknowledge Lamantia's
importance.... And, of course, Philip represents
something that for many years has been an absolute obsession
with me – and that is the returning of American poetry to the
mainstream of international literature.

-- Kenneth Rexroth, in a 1969 interview.

THE INVISIBLE WRITER

Although the poetry of Philip Lamantia has been extant since the 50's,it has received almost no sustained critical attention, and this despite the author's having played a significant role in both the Beat and the San Francisco Renaissance movements. In addition, he has the distinction of being one of first American poets to commit himself entirely to Surrealism and one of the few to have a personal relationship with any of the founders of the movement, in his case Breton himself, who in fact published some of Lamantia's early poems in the well-known Surrealist émigré journal *VVV*. To date his poetry comprises nine collections, including a New and Selected edition published by City Lights in 1997. 1997 also saw the appearance of a bilingual selected poems in France. 1 Yet there is still little discussion of his work, and he is sometimes omitted from

histories of these various movements and from their anthologies. The situation is doubly strange when we consider that his poetry is a direct continuation of the main tradition of European Surrealism, that it shows the influence of Breton, Desnos, Peret, and Artaud and has affinities as well with such Spanish-speaking authors as Vellejo, Neruda, and Lorca, all of whose difficult work is widely appreciated and frequently studied. One might imagine that an American author employing a comparable style and with similar daring would be looked at with special interest, and yet this seems not to have been the case. 2 Could it be that this very style, though admired in foreign poets, becomes somehow objectionable when practiced in English and in the United States? One might almost think so, and yet Lamantia's style in its boldness and range is one of the most distinctive in post-war American poetry. At its best it seems entirely comparable to his great models and precursors, and we find in it, moreover, a degree of variety sometimes not seen in other surrealists.

This study attempts to remedy in part this unaccountable neglect, though admittedly we will consider only a few of the main impulses of what is an extremely complex body of work. For unlike some other lesser-known figures in the American avant-garde of the 50's and 60's, who sometimes give the impression of having wandered into writing almost by mistake, Lamantia is very much a creature of literature, and a poet's poet if there ever was one. Surely he has written some of the densest poems in recent American literature, and he has numerous pieces in which language is pressed to a limit and then beyond. Among American authors, he reminds one at times of Hart Crane, at times of Pound, and at times of Robert Duncan, and there is a close connection with Ginsberg in his more surreal moments. Nevertheless, we will attempt to map out what

might be thought the general contours of his poetic world with an emphasis on close readings of a number of key texts. Beyond this I hope to entertain, to some extent, and within the limitations that time and space impose, certain more general questions about the nature of surrealism as an artistic approach. Perhaps examining the work of one of its more obscure figures will prove to be a useful means of reconsidering the movement as a whole, as though one were to be led into a large and famous public building through a little-used side door.

There is no substitute for a schema, and mine, in keeping with the prismatic language of my subject, is one of color: for it seems to me that large portions of Lamantia's work proceed under the heading of certain fundamental passions. We find first an ardent phase, marked by the red of desire and of Eros. Here we see work governed by the spirit of Breton. It presents us with an erotic poetry which takes the erotic itself as the point of departure for a visionary impulse and makes of it a vehicle for the consideration of a number of metaphysical concerns. Many of these pieces are in fact early and are written at times in an unfashionably "poetic" idiom -- incantatory and dream-like -- and often centered on an idealized woman. Not all such work comes early in the poet's career, however, and in fact it represents a continuing impulse which never really diminishes. We are reminded that certain elements of European Surrealism, particularly in France, were a kind of modern rebirth of Petrarchism, and we find in them a special baroque complexity which codes desire and its transformations in an ornamented and deliberately conceited idiom.

The second phase we have placed under the sign of black, the black of darkness and of night and of a near-eclipse of reason. Here we find poetry dominated by the

influence of Artaud, probably one of the few such bodies of work written in English. In this phase of his career, coinciding roughly with the decade of the 50's, the poet's writing exhibits a gnostic vision, in which there dominates a sense of the fallen, residual nature of the world and of language itself. The body is often viewed as a charred remnant or dross. There is an exasperated impatience with literary language, a kind of sparagmos of the poetic word, and the explicitly political poems become angrier. Comparisons might be made with Cesar Vallejo, with the Lorca of *Poet in New York*, and with some of Neruda's pieces in the *Residencia* sequence.

A later phase, quieter, more reflective, and continuing into recent publications, we have labeled simply green. Green sees a return of a utopian vision, but this time the focal point is not so much the Woman as the physical world and our ecological relationship to it. The utopian place and time are found among certain Native American groups in the United States and in Mexico who have been able to maintain a non-destructive relationship to the natural world. Here lines become longer, and the surrealist baroque yields, to some extent, to a more visually oriented imagism. This phase marks something of a break with surrealist style as we usually think of it, and yet it also reminds us that this understanding is sometimes too narrow and that surrealism has at times forced itself to confront the real more directly. It represents the most recent work in the *Selected Poems* of 1997 and so is a late development in a style which remains always somewhat unpredictable.

The subsequent and final chapter is not written under the sign of any color but rather that of a place or a dimension, the elsewhere. Like the erotic vision, it is not confined to a particular volume but is an ongoing and recurrent impulse. Elsewhere

marks out concepts of transcendence that are found in the work, sketching a range of limit experiences for reason, which by this means delineates the extreme edges of its world. We conclude with an attempt to consider, in brief fashion, some theoretical implications of surrealism as a style of writing.

And yet it is not merely a style that we examine here, though it may be that the poetry we shall consider stands out most sharply from the rest of contemporary American poetry exactly on that score. It is rather a total vision of life and, in part, of life in the United States which the poetry attempts to project. In the former instance it is visionary, Romantic, at times gnostic; in the latter instance, dissident, anarchistic, and utopian.

TEXTUAL DISSIDENCE IN BEAT POETRY

Writers of the Beat and the San Francisco Renaissance movements are often seen as having an antagonistic relationship with the rest of American culture; they are outsiders, rebels, and permanent dissidents. Part of this view is based on their work's political content, since it is filled with a disgust for the signal failings of American society: racism, militarism, and an unopposed consumer capitalism. Yet only part of this dissidence is expressed overtly and in terms of content. It is not only Burroughs' uncanny and more-than-paranoid awareness of proliferating systems of "control" which make him a radical voice, but the "cut up" method too. It is not merely Ginsberg's political commitments which make him the leading dissident American writer of his generation but also the "bop/hip/gnostic/imagist" free verse, the wonderful and resonating bardic

line, which does as well. Lamantia created an equally visible style. Abstruse in reference, carefully considered in word choice, it is constructed with a precise and almost cruel artfulness and, though often expressing intense emotion, is rather studied and allusive. It is far from any concept of spontaneous expression whether in verse or prose, and with its learned references and complex ties to a host of European writers (and painters) remote from the more egalitarian atmosphere of the "reading". Yet by these means he creates his own special voice, distinct form the other writers of this movement, at times strikingly so. In addition, there is a certain broader political significance even in his initial choice of styles. As one of the few American writers to adopt a completely surrealist mode, he has, by virtue of that, a somewhat oppositional stance in relation to the literary culture in which he worked and works, which has generally been more hospitable to various forms of realism or in which surrealism, when it has been adopted, has been tempered with at least some elements of realistic description, as it is in Ginsberg. One should not forget that there is an underground aura around surrealism even now, and around those who attempt to practice it, at least in anything like its original boldness and anarchism. This is not to say that the style has not been assimilated at all; nor is it necessarily a good thing to attempt to cling stubbornly to the initial manifestations of something, whether it be a literary style or a movement in painting, music, or art. As Deleuze remarks, things are understood poorly if judged by their beginnings, and it is only in their maturity, when their strength is assured, that one can see what they really are. Has Surrealism reached such a stage? And if it has, has it by this means changed its nature, so that to look for it in its original form is to commit a fundamental error? What is the nature of surrealism, at last? We defer this question to a separate study, though we hope to make some remarks

toward it at the end of this one. And yet whatever answer one might give to this question, there remains the issue of whether Surrealism, in some recognizable form, has any current cultural importance. In passing, and confining our remarks simply to poetry, one might point to what seems a renewed interest in it among younger poets, an indication perhaps of on-going vitality, if not of wide cultural acceptance. And of course the fact of this ongoing interest is itself a reason to devote more extended attention to one of the pioneers of the movement in North America. And yet, while acknowledging the necessities of time, history, and place, we may also feel that it is not the worst thing to preserve the initial moment of inspiration, at least insofar as one can, in its purity, in its energy, and in its recalcitrant newness. For that salience and stubbornness which refuses to be normalized is the mark of the event, which must always be in excess of what is expected and, to that extent, disrupt the current and the familiar. This impulse marks Lamantia's work at every turn. He is nothing if not a contrary nature, antinomian, subversive, sage-like in some of the later work, yet often a volatile and coruscating spirit, and willing, despite a learned and discriminating taste, to sacrifice form and the decorum of any known style to this refractory and restless energy.

BIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA

Philip Lamantia was born October 27, 1927 in San Francisco, to Nunzio Lamantia and Mary Tarantino Lamantia who had both emigrated as children from Sicily. He was an extremely precocious student, and, in addition to an early attraction to Poe, exhibited an equally intense interest in social revolution, which, according to one account, lead to his brief expulsion from junior high school for "intellectual delinquency." 3 While still a freshman in high school, he took in the Dali and Miro retrospectives which were held at the San Francisco Museum of Art, and this lead to an immediate and profound interest in the Surrealist movement. Correspondence followed with some of the leading exponents of the movement in the United States -- Charles Henry Ford, Parker Tyler -- and then with Breton himself, who acclaimed the still-adolescent poet as "a voice that rises once in a hundred years." In 1943 several of Lamantia's early poems were published in the Surrealist journal *VVV* which was edited by David Hare and Breton. At about the same time the poet, still only 16, traveled to New York where he lived for several years, taking part in the complex cultural milieu created there by the European surrealist emigres -- Tanguy, Breton, Duchamp -- and working as an assistant editor at *View,* the journal edited by Ford and Parker Tyler. During this time he also made the acquaintance of similarly-minded American artists and intellectuals -- the critic Harold Rosenberg, the writer and composer Paul Bowles, and the experimental film maker Maya Deren, in whose short film *Meshes of the Afternoon* he briefly appears.

Upon returning to San Francisco after the war he studied for two year at Berkeley without matriculating, concentrating, in a way perhaps similar to Robert Duncan, on medieval studies, the English renaissance, and the social sciences, interests which were combined with an attraction to gnosticism and to various forms of mysticism. During this tine he also became active in libertarian-anarchist groups in the San Francisco area, contributing to journals such as *Horizon* and *Ark.*

Lamantia spent much of the decade of the 50's outside the United States, living part of the time in Mexico, as well as in Morocco and in France. In these ways, we see him following a course similar to that of the Beat writers themselves -- a line of flight leading outside the society of control and conformity then being aggressively constructed in the immediate postwar years. This flight led also to an involvement with other forms of artistic expression which seemed to suggest an alternative to the mainstream culture of the time -- in particular the music of jazz (another point of common interest between Lamatia and the Beats). Yet it led also to drug use as well, and this took its toll on the author's physical health. A period of illness and of relative inactivity followed, to be succeeded in the 60's with a new creative impulse, equally surrealist and yet with some new features. Beginning in 1952 Lamantia had become drawn to the Native American culture of his region, even going so far as to participate in the peyote and tobacco rites of the Washo Indians near lake Tahoe and the Cora Indians of Mexico. This interest continued through the 60's and 70's, with the author and his wife travelling up and down the coast of British Columbia and California, investigating sites of anthropological interest. Thus his involvement in such matters significantly predates that of many, if not all, American writers of his generation, and in this way too his sensibility can be thought

pioneering. More importantly, it is linked with a growing ecological concern that begins to dominate his poetry from the 70's on. This commitment, moreover, requires stylistic changes which we will want to examine and whose broader theoretical significance we will need to consider, if only briefly.

After his period of expatriate wandering Lamantia settled permanently in San Francisco where he taught at San Francisco State University and at the Art Institute. As of this writing he continues to be active as a poet, though remaining, as always, somewhat aloof from the "poetry world".

VISIONS OF EXCESS

If it is useful for a study to have a single concept guiding it, or, rather, if we find on completing our work that a single concept did guide it perhaps unawares, then in this case it would be the idea of the excessive, of the exceeding and self-exceeding which various thinkers have taught us to see in nature, in culture, and in ourselves, and which I see as receiving one of its quintessential artistic expressions in Surrealism. We can observe in this form of writing a continual seeking out of what surpasses expected and known boundaries, and a pushing of expression past any concept of limit. The surrealist style creates a space in which Language haunts itself with its own resonances and echoes; yet in doing so, it attempts not to inscribe the trace of a ghostly past moment of perception but to move perception itself into novel apprehensions. It likewise enacts a continually provocative cinema in which image follows image in potentially infinite

combinations. Yet here again the purpose is the attempt to find what is novel and as yet unformulated in experience. That which is unformulated, indeed sometimes barely known, by definition exceeds the known and will tend to be unapproachable through fixed concepts. A theoretically diversified approach is therefore needed, and those thinkers will prove especially useful who attempt to construct theories equally open-ended, whose concepts emphasize process and the testing of established limits, and whose thought seeks not categories of judgement but forms of exploratory encounter.

From Levinas we take an early vision of the primordial enigma of Being itself which he denominates in the bare but resonant phrase *il y a*. Here we find an ontology which seems intended to defeat the definitional impulse of most traditional ontology in favor of a quasi-mythical formulation of the molecular fecundity and primordial dynamism of Being, and likewise of its disorienting, overwhelming, and threatening nature. In addition, we also draw upon his novel insight into the relationship between erotic experience, speech, and laughter. For Levinas, speech during the erotic encounter is subject to a special disintegration of its informative or imperative functions. It breaks up into incantatory non-sense and into laughter. We find here a way of thinking about the special stylistic features of surrealism -- its flights of images and its performative rush of language. An excess of libidinal energy creates a dynamic de-stabilization of language, converting it from structure to power. In Bataille we find the concept of an excess in nature itself, its tendency toward profusion and waste exemplified by the sun, which yet is also to be found in ourselves, in our own passions and aggressions. We take a dynamic, process metaphysics as the intellectual background for our study, therefore, and with it a corresponding epistemology. The recent revaluation of the work of Merleau-Ponty has

occasioned considerable interest among American theorists, among other things for a new interpretation it provides of the relation of language to sense experience. Without attempting to deny either the diacritical nature of language or the inevitable *ecart* between it and things, it develops ways of seeing the relationship between language and the world which brings us beyond the post-modern impasse of signs referring to other signs. It likewise provides new models for understanding the complex intersubjectivity by which this language and other cultural forms are shaped and modified, created and recreated. Finally in the work of Deleuze, whose presence forms the greatest influence on much of our discussion, we find more than anywhere else new ways of understanding artistic projects which lie outside of mainstream approaches. The openness to process and flux as well as to elemental forces beyond the human provides an especially appropriate background for understanding the nature of surrealism as a style of writing. 4

CULTURAL POLITICS IS READING ELSEWHERE

Finally, there may be a sense in which this book borders upon cultural studies, in that it proposes ultimately an irreconcilable difference between its subject -- Lamantia, and beyond that Surrealism itself -- and the culture of the United States. Yet if so, it approaches this by a devious route and remains always at a remove from specific arguments in the realm of cultural studies per se. Yet merely by moving into a somewhat unfamiliar text milieu we begin to open up perspectives from which to assess the culture at large, and to understand more clearly its nature and its shortcomings. Though it is

beyond the scope of our discussion to pursue this issue, we might find ourselves able to consider larger questions of cultural inheritance and politics if we ask the question of whether surrealism ever did, or ever could have, become fully integrated into American literary culture.

NOTES

1 The volume is *Revelations d'un Jeune Surrealiste.* Trad. Jean-Jacques Celly; Jacques Bremond, 1997.

2 Here and throughout, I capitalize the word Surrealism when referring to the movement per se, and leave the term in lower case when referring to the general style.

3 The biographical information is drawn largely from the article by Nancy Peters in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 16, p. 330-336.

4 The profound connections between Deleuze's thought and Surrealism would repay extensive analysis. We must here confine ourselves to pointing out one: in the following passage from *What is Philosophy?* the authors are speaking against logic as a tool for philosophical thought:

> Instead of a string of linked propositions, it would be better to isolate the flow of interior monologue, or the strange forkings of the most ordinary conversation. By separating them from their psychological, as well as their sociological adhesions, we would be able to show how thought as such produces something interesting when it accedes to the infinite movement that frees it from truth as supposed paradigm and reconquers an immanent power of creation. [139-140]

And yet this is nothing other than Surrealist automatism -- automatic writing and the unbroken monologue Breton speaks of in the *First Manifesto*; "the strange forkings of the most ordinary conversation" are nothing other than the "exquisite corpse."

CHAPTER ONE RED: THE EROTIC VISION

I

SURREALIST EROS

Do we not always begin with love, as writers and as readers? And does not all writing contain the idea of love in some fashion? Yet of love itself we know one thing: that there are many kinds. Surely one of the ways of distinguishing writers is to consider the types of love they deal with, and which most prominently or especially well. Philip Lamantia, in his first, astonishingly precocious work, began as a poet entirely devoted to tracing the complexities of Eros. Yet, as with other surrealists, he presents us with a special vision of the erotic, one that contains both the known and the unfamiliar, the welcome and the disturbing.

It seems safe to say that European Surrealist poetry, in dealing with the erotic, approached an ultimate degree of mannerism and stylization, a kind of baroque style, as certain critics have thought it. 1 Perhaps it is natural that these anti-realist tendencies should be especially marked in the area of erotic poetry. In dealing with this charged subject, the poetry strives to exceed normal expression, to create an overflow of meaning that is caused by and also creates a surplus of images and of figures. In looking through Lamantia's love poetry, we will see repeatedly how it pursues this tendency of excess, both stylistically and thematically. The poetry strives not for an accuracy, nor even for a

fullness of expression, but rather for a superabundant expression, for this is needed to do justice to experiences which themselves move beyond the bounds of the erotic narrowly considered, both in their intensity and in their nature**.** In this way, it follows an aesthetic quite at odds with much contemporary American poetry, for it in no way models itself after natural speech. Instead it resorts to the hieratic, the enigmatic, and the incantatory, seeking in the radiance of its figures a light beyond the merely rational and a warmth other than that of ordinary passion. Certainly there are many who will find such a style strange or perhaps outmoded, and yet it could be that the stylized nature of such work gives it a visionary intensity denied to more tempered and realist approaches. To follow it and to appreciate its special beauty, it is useful to compare it to some of its European predecessors. Indeed, in this mode of erotic celebration its connection to these writers and to the poetics of extravagance they pursued is especially clear.

Surrealism did start as love poetry, after all, though of a peculiar kind, or at least the erotic was an especially important resource in allowing the Surrealists to define their special project. The poet's mission was to see beyond the surface of reality, especially the social reality presented to him. Yet he should also attempt to see beyond himself, to exceed his own given emotions, shaping them along different lines than those society would encourage, and perhaps enlarging them in the process. In Lamantia's case, erotic celebration is a vehicle for exploring a range of experience, both literal and imaginative, which takes him into areas of metaphysical concern: ideas of transcendence, of self-hood, and of alterity. But in dealing with an unfamiliar writer, it is best to put forward examples relatively quickly:

I touch you with the hour that drips scent
snared from the chain of immaculate lice
who avenge themselves forever on the holy of holies
I touch you with the wind heaving the breasts of the morning
I touch you in the overcrowds
and they vanish
replaced by all the women who resemble you
and I touch them with the eyes of the sun

["I Touch You"]

I pass without passports
rapid vision overtakes the storm
of this glittering void I love
and reveals everything in a speeding cloud
This is the moral for inventing ecstasies

Freed from the clutch of memory
I eat the eagle's windy branches
my eye the lion's cave

We find here an array of striking associations and images, combined with a sense of *exultation*, which we can compare with Breton.

Ma femme a` la chevelure de feu de bois
Aux pensees d'eclairs de chaleur
A la taille de sablier
Ma femme a` la taille de loutre entre les dents du tigre
Ma femme a` la bouche do cocarde et de bouquet d'etoiles de derniere grandeur
Aux dents d'empreintes de souris blanche sur la terre blanche
A la langue d'ambre et de verre frottes

["L'Union libre"]

Je caresse tout ce qui fut toi
Dans tout ce qui doit l'etre encore
J'ecoute siffler melodieusement
Tes bras innombrables
Serpent unique dans tous les arbres
Tes bras au center desquels tourne le cristal de la rose des vents
Ma fontaine vivante de Sivas

["L'Air de l'eau"]

Or, in a somewhat different vein, we find passages such as the following, in which an affinity with Desnos seems to show itself in a style more somnambulist, a bit less rhetorical, and perhaps closer to song:

> As your lips raise water from the mist
> An apparition of your mirror
> Takes you within its warmth
> Reflecting black wounds set open by the fingernail of the dumb
>
> Solitude is your violence
>
> My love
> My gypsy
> Among the fallen you are luminous
> You wander with those who are mystery
> With a naked heart upon your breast
>
> ["Mirror and Heart"]

> By the window cut in half Jeanlu
> Jeanlu in the opulent night her breast riding the sky
> Jeanlu asleep like a nautilus smiling at Victor Hugo
> Jeanlu bared on the branches coming from my third eye
> Jeanlu if it is a candle of fire women blue in the night Jeanlu!
>
> ["Jeanlu"]

If there were a common denominator among these passages, it would be the speaker's vision of the woman as a mesmerizing power, an enchanting otherness, which does not lack an element of threat. He solicits her attention, confesses his passion for her, and, as he does so, drapes her in chains of epithets and images, chains which are not merely sequences but also efforts to hold her fast, to fix her in a phrase or in an image, even

though the phrases are numerous and the images themselves copious and fascinating. She is, in a way, anatomized into a kaleidoscopic array of traits, characteristics, and postures. Yet for all that, she possesses her own power still, and is repeatedly associated with the elements themselves, which form a kind of background for her. Nonetheless, she remains a singularity, something unique and not exchangeable with anything else, though she may blend her nature with other natural kinds to become part water spirit or fish or bird, part of the candle itself, part of the night that it burns against, or indeed part of the fire. She is manifest in these texts, therefore, as a fascinating panoply and, in a sense, as *raiment,* for she is clothed with the images of nature at their most appealing and powerful, just as she herself is the covering for, and the ultimate manifestation of, life itself. Indeed one feels behind these images a reserve, an originating ground from which they arise and back into which they recede. This is both she herself and also the natural world, which forms her background and yet provides the images that somehow express her essence.

And yet despite a certain auratic quality in the language, and an element of idealization, the poetry takes as part of its subject the depths of physicality itself, with its attendant desires, its libidinal anarchy. It is her body, after all, which draws the poet's attention. -- her breasts, her hair, her thighs ("delicate leopards in the wood where you wait.") ["The Talisman"] This body is seen from two perspectives: as a singular existence, unique and irreplaceable, and yet also as a manifestation of larger and encompassing energies. There is a divided attention, therefore: a regard focused upon her, and yet a more visionary seeing, a reaching beyond her toward nature itself. It is this doubleness which draws the poet in and which inspires him, and he attempts to open his language to *it* and to the ambiguities and paradoxes which, as a result, stream through his

discourse as though through an open door. The energies of the body are obscure and restive, yet a metaphysical dimension inherent in the surrealist gaze requires a certain cultivation in its expression, an artfulness and an intellectual cunning. Only in this way can he truly respond to the Beloved. Beauty requires beauty as a tribute and calls it forth. Yet it also draws the poet toward an "outside" of thought which requires the entire mind to negotiate it. The eye is dazzled (by her), yet the mind may not slumber. For it is not her alone that he responds to but nature as a power manifest in her and she as a power somehow manifest through all of it. This feeling, this experience, exceeds reason. Indeed it is not logical. She is a woman, after all, and nothing more. And yet how false that reductive response is to the actual experience of romantic passion in its depth and turbulence, an experience which will not yield its secrets or its transports to such common sense, which stands out in such a context as a mere and rather timorous economic calculation. 2

Therefore, he allows himself to be drawn toward her in a desiring gesture in which language and reason must surpass themselves in attempting to do justice to an alterity which remains always beyond them and beyond the established, the sedimented condition into which they always return and from which he must continually reawaken them.

> The whisper of the inter-voice to wrap you in the mantle of marvelous power, with the secret protection of the forest that falls asleep in fire whose ores become transmined only for love – all your steps will lead to the inner sanctum none but you behold, your shadow putting on the body of metaphoric light.
>
> The stone I have tossed into the air of chance shall come to you one great day and exfoliate the original scarab, the carbuncle of delights, the

> pomegranate inviolate, the sonorous handkerchief of the Comte de Saint-Germain, all the reinvented perfumes of ancient Egypt, the map of the earth in the Age of Libra when the air shall distribute our foods, the sempiternal spectrum of sundown at Segovia...
>
> ["The Romantic Movement"]

Certainly it is not a question here of representation in the usual sense. These figures are not elements of a description (though they contain bits of that); they are rather vehicles of a metaphysical perplexity (What am I in my nature, and what is she? What is the nature of the world which contains us both and of the time and space which divide us?), and yet of a desire as well, a libidinal intensity born and suffered, and in a sense endured; equally, they are a kind of primitive conjuring of occult powers, of the energies of nature itself. There is therefore, here and in surrealist texts in general, an exceeding of description and of representation in the direction of a witnessing and a conjuring. Yet it is a witnessing which bears only a dim connection to the ethical, for it is not the well-being of the other it desires under the aegis of Justice, but union with the other under the aegis of Passion, indeed it desires more than union but in fact possession. By what means, though, could this come about? What can cross the gap between one person and another, between one desiring subject and another?

For it is a gap that makes me all the more aware of her absolute externality to all that I want from her, of the ways she exceeds my expectations and my control. This externality, this beyond, prompts me and draws me toward it, into its unknown. The absence I then encounter, her absence precisely, forces me back into myself and upon the resources of my memory, which are also those of my language. This surging up, and this reaching outward, followed then by an immediate falling back, is a kind of recursive process -- of hope building toward expressed desire, of desire followed by frustration,

and this followed by still further desires experienced differently now and in a kind of inward gathering, in a different key, a different dimension of mentality. Is it implausible to see this complex experience as the basis of the poetic utterance, as the matrix of its dawning words and images? I, as lover, receive the solution to my problem, therefore, in a type of language. It is in *it* that I find what I need (though it will not give me what I want). And it enables me to insinuate myself into her awareness through these words which are the one thing that can cross the space between us, annihilating it as separation and converting it into an incipient sociality, a "we two." It is striking to consider that even my hand upon her body cannot do this, and in fact could become a type of violation at any moment. Only the incipient sociality of the word can bridge this absolute difference. And is it not strange that the word rather than the flesh should be the vehicle for establishing intimacy, particularly when we realize that it is also the medium of law and of the Law. Erotic speech, however, obeys another dispensation -- the scattered sun of its motivating desire distributed through sequences of words and phrases. Yet animating this utterance and tormenting it is the awareness of her persistent multiplicity as well as of her absolute autonomy. As Deleuze reminds us in his study of Proust, the Beloved remains a source of signs, and in fact an over-abundance of them, which the poet is compelled to respond to and around which he forms his expression.3 This is the reason for the proliferation of images in surrealist style. Yet she remains always somewhat beyond the reach of these appeals and these seductions. Because of this, he enjoys no real fulfillment. Rather the Beloved becomes the elusive motivation of further feeling -- agonized, celebratory, ecstatic -- and of further writing, entirely given to a *delire*, a

libidinal gesture and a rhetorical excess, at once overwrought and shapely, a clair-obscure, both public and private, the style of surrealist Eros.

ARTIFICE AND THE EROTIC CELEBRANT

Therefore we should recognize that the speaker's position is less one of attempts at communication or seduction than of being subject to intensities, intensities which we should understand as not exactly psychological**.** He is a site crossed by them and his language is rent by them, his figures broken into fragments in what is yet a self-conscious display. We might say that the underlying purpose of such writing is to exhibit desire itself in a kind of *demonstration*, as a religious celebrant renders visible a mystery, which yet exceeds reason and normal speech. Consider Albert Cook's observations on troubadour love poetry:

> At the pitch attained by troubadour utterance, desire and fulfillment powerfully and strangely interact with one another through all the gestures of an abandonment presenting itself as formal control and of desperation fashioned into attainment.... The whole audience is asked to engage in the spectacle of an exhibition of a desire expressed by the poet for a woman, in a statement that as one of its gambits may involve the structural complications of endlessly deferred fulfillment. (135-6)

The poem is a making visible of a particular style of love and a particular attitude toward the erotic. Yet in Lamantia's poetry, written in the late 40's and 50's and in the United States, the speaker cannot but recognize that this attitude is somewhat foreign to the cultural context in which he finds himself. And it is foreign because, among other things, it is not the record of an autobiographical experience. We can see this more clearly if we look at some observations by Giorgio Agamben on *trobar* in *Language and Death*.

> The troubadours do not wish to recall arguments already in use by a topos, but rather they wish to experience the topos of all topoi....*Amors* is the name the troubadours gave to the experience of the advent of the poetic word and thus, for them, love is *razo de trobar* par excellence.
>
> It is difficult to understand the sense in which the poets understood love, as long as we obstinately construe it according to a secular misunderstanding, in a purely biographical context. For the troubadours, it is not a question of psychological or biographical events that are successively expressed in words, but rather, of the attempt to live the topos itself, the event of language as a fundamental amorous and poetic experience. (67-68)

This is the opposite of the Puritan model in which one first has an experience, an ”inner” experience, and then professes it in words, perhaps aloud. And yet writing of the kind that Agamben describes is not merely peformative; it is itself a becoming, and a becoming other. 4 That is to say, it is *a learning*, and a deliberate cultivation of one’s relationship to the Other along certain lines, specifically, along those lines which are felt to be an enlargement of the world for both Lover and Beloved. It is an increasing of the humanity of both, and in a particular way. For despite the highly conventionalized rhetoric of this array of historical styles -- *trobar, dolce stil nuova,* Petrarchism and its numerous descendents -- they all attempt to convey one thing: that the Beloved is unique, that she is singular by definition and that her appearance in the poet’s world is a singular event. Insofar as he recognizes this and does justice to it in words, he feels himself part of this event, one in which the human is liberated, if only in imagination, from all orders of exchange. In this context, words call forth a type of *becoming otherwise* and are themselves the vehicle for it. For this reason they may involve the subversion of established codes and, in the case of troubadour love poetry, the establishment of a new

one. What Agamben's remarks show is that we should view such writing as a means of transcending representation in the direction of a performance which is also a self-cultivation -- one which is inherently revisionist. In its American context, the significance of Lamantia's love poetry lies only partly in its portrayal of the release of the erotic from repression. We have many writers who have spoken to that issue. Yet we have had few who have done it in an incantatory style in which words and metaphors haunt each other to create a reverberant aura, and who have attempted to make that style the performing of a special disposition toward the other, one in which she is the embodiment of the unique and the irreplaceable, and in which one's awareness and demonstration of this ratifies it by proclaiming it to the culture at large.

There are those who would complain about the artifice of such a style, and perhaps of the excessive ambition of such an intention. And yet they might make such complaints of the work of Breton, of Desnos, or of Eluard. But I think it is important to understand the intention itself, which is related, in certain respects, to the deliberate artifice one finds in Surrealist painting. This painting does at times work with an archaizing tendency, which is one of its ways of creating a peculiar alienation effect. It aims for a marked theatrical quality and contains a similarly hieratic element which subjects the viewer to a kind of scene of initiation. Such scenes are inherently charged, numinous, and uncanny. Thus the lingering poeticism of some surrealist texts seems related, for example, to the practices of de Chirico in his mode of what we might call the haunted archaic, which is itself a trope, after all, for the uncanny. Yet to present such images, whether in paint or in words, is almost by definition to verge upon the artificial or the arch. It is true that in Breton, for instance, one often finds a certain formal quality

in the language, especially in the prose, and some critics have even used the word "stilted" to describe it. 5 Surrealism, it would seem, repeatedly had recourse to a contrived language, whether verbal or pictorial, in pursuit of its ends. We are fairly comfortable with the daring and bizarre effects which sometimes resulted, but, at least in the United States, have tended to be less receptive to the element of deliberate artifice in writing. And yet it is a traditional way of conveying the idea of the momentous, of the sublime, perhaps of the sacred. Demotic language cannot be used for everything, and likewise the studied reference may sometimes be the most economical means to convey a complex of associations. Neither was avoided by Hart Crane, for example, with whom Lamantia has many affinities, nor by Ezra Pound. One might question whether the attempt is always successful in Lamantia's case (or in the case of these others, for that matter), but I think it is important to understand the motivation of such techniques and their provenance.

HYPERLANGUAGE

These erotic poems, therefore, do not describe the Beloved. They respond to her and to the libidinal excitement and psychological challenge she represents. Through their metaphors they pay tribute to a startling glory, to an excess, by which the speaker is overwhelmed. It is interesting to consider a point in common between Surrealism in this regard and the Platonic tradition, however much they may differ in other ways. Platonism sees such personal beauty as a lure toward the apprehension of a Beyond. The Surrealist response, with its mythology of the Marvelous, bears some relation to this at the level of thought: the Beloved is an emissary from elsewhere, *ailleur*, an embodiment of something more; the Marvelous is a door opening to an unthought-of realm. Yet at the level of *writing,* the response amounts to a disintegration of rationality in a flight of images which, following Lyotard, we might characterize as *figural*. In *Discours, Figure* Lyotard creates a theory of meaning that attempts, among other things, to question the relationship between the legible and the visual. In Alphonso Lingis' summary:

> [In] *Discours, Figure* [Lyotard] draws attention to the letters in discourse as broken partial objects, to the words as undecomposable blocks, undivided fluxes or full bodies with a tonic value. These belong to the order of breaths, sighs, cries, aspirations of desire. ...In dreams, what works in dream-work is not the meaning, but a figural element arousing configurations of images that use and incorporate words, make them flow, make them follow fluxes and elements that are not linguistic. Meaning-elements are in dream-work treated like things, linked up in chains and collages of images. [*Libido* 116]

We can see in this passage a perfect description of Surrealist style. Images and vague spatial orderings are associated, in a kind of internal cinema, with linguistic fragments

and descriptive elements. In addition, language itself is subjected to a special animation. In this connection, we might also recall Levinas' account of the erotic. For Levinas, language, during the erotic encounter, is subject to an excess of libidinal energy which causes it to break up into non-sense, into fragmented and incantatory word play, and into laughter.6 The flights of words and phrases one sometimes finds in Lamantia, as in Breton and others, also create the impression of a language released from its informative or imperative functions. Floating free of ties to practical communication, it rises into a lyric spiral of association, like water boiling up into steam, even evocation left somewhat behind (never entirely, of course) by an expressive *elan*, a glittering hyper-sense, whose best theorist so far is perhaps Lecercle, in *Philosophy Through the Looking-Glass.* 7 Yet just as with Levinas' lovers whose speech bubbles away in the effervescence of erotic laughter and banter, such flights of words enact the surge of libidinal energies. Since the poems -- Lamantia's, Breton's, Desnos' -- are written texts after all, we feel invited to participate in this liberation of language, this special exultation of sense and more-than-sense. Such work tends toward a limit: the relative loss of externality as a result of an extreme investment in enacting the fluxes and excitements of the libidinal life of the subject. The resulting style -- figural without being precisely visual, marked by a baroque overabundance and lability, and marked, too, by a continual allusiveness -- will not allow us to locate a decisive textual *here*, a definitive textual *this*. It may be that subjectivity -- a region of obscurity, after all -- can only be coded in the portents and approximations of such a complex textuality. The surrealist style becomes a figural excess of conceits turned and returned upon themselves, a labyrinth through which desire is pursued and in which it is multiplied by the simulacra it creates of itself in the course

of its manifold turnings. Yet this complex textuality is motivated by the elusive and yet inescapable experience of fundamental embodiment, the libidinal body itself. The style's performative aspect, in fact, is based in that very embodiment, in the body which is not itself a text but a physical reality, and whose typical mode of existence is not the creation of meaning but the undergoing of compulsions. There is a paradox: the expression which had seemed to flee from the world of fact by leaving the visible behind is rooted, we now realize, all the more firmly in that world, since it arises from the refractory energies and its echoing desires of the libidinal body itself, desires which must always have an object of some kind, a willed destination -- whether the body of another, or some transformed version of it, or, finally, the physical world itself in some sense.

It might be useful now to look more closely at an array of examples from Lamantia's work which will show such a style and sensibility as they function over a range of specific *topoi*. We might map out a progress from the most inner-directed and seemingly narcissistic exploration of erotic experience to moments which carry the speaker gradually closer to more direct encounters with the otherness he seeks. Eventually, we find ourselves moving outside the realm of human interaction entirely and into an encounter with death and with the elemental itself.

II

THE LIBIDINAL BODY

AWAKENED FROM SLEEP

Swept from the clouds
We are among gardens under the sea.
Flaming white windows
From which nightingales flaunt in the sun.

Your whole body is a wing,
Daughter of half-seen worlds
Together we fly to rocks of flesh
Beneath the ashes of ancient lovers.

There is no rule here
No season and no misery
There are only our desires
Revealed in the mist.
Here ghosts are reborn every moment
In the spider webs of your face.

You have become so monumental
And I so sleepy.
Water is trickling down your lucid breasts.
In a minute you'll be a shadow
And I a flame in sleep.

The poem has the soft and song-like lyricism we often find in Desnos, and some of that same slightly old-fashioned quality as well. It opens, though, with a narrative and descriptive statement which has some of the abruptness of a command. *Fiat Lux,* one

might almost here echoing somewhere within it. A new state of being is announced -- that of waking consciousness. And yet, surprisingly, we find ourselves in an aquatic world represented by the charming image of undersea gardens which happen also to be radiant with the sun and clamorous with singing birds. As in other pieces from *Erotic Poems*, the opening movement is one of transport, of a movement elsewhere intended to prompt a new awareness. The language, however, is still one of statement; though it seeks an animation of movement, it has not quite found it as yet.

A threshold seems to be crossed, though, in the third stanza which announces itself in a direct address to the Beloved, and in a mode of greater intimacy: "Your whole body is a wing/ Daughter of half-seen worlds." Certainly it is a beautiful conceit: the Beloved's body imagined as a wing -- soft and yet powerful, a mode of transport for her and perhaps for both. The idea is expressed in a line that is itself light and feather-like, turning up slightly in its vowel sounds at the end. The next line, however, sobers the poem's tone momentarily, settling expression in a gnomic statement at once rapt and grave: she is the daughter of half-seen worlds; she gives notice of these worlds in a kind of annunciation, and we glimpse them perhaps just past her silhouette. Though the language is not especially pictorial, the thought itself is, since it is influenced by the conventions of halos, auras, and the like. Thus, through her presence, new possibilities are revealed and new dimensions are made available to the poet's awareness. She is their embodiment, since she is their daughter, and yet they exceed her, for they create the context of her appearance.

A greater depth is reached in the next stanza, or perhaps one should think of it as a further recess. There the normal rule of time is suspended, as likewise the factor of

resistance, the stubborn facticity of the world. We find them dissolved in the encompassing element of desire, with which the water is now so completely identified that there is no longer any mention of it *as* water. Desire here seems to create for itself a self-sufficient plenum. Yet nature still imposes its limits in one way or another. Ghosts are reborn in the spider web of the Beloved's face, we are told -- a striking and sinister image which momentarily introduces a negative mood, perhaps of foreboding, and signifies the darker potential of this lower world of Eros and its ceaseless transformations. The ghosts of past desires and indeed of past lovers are recycled continually in this fluid medium. The images of water and mist create this impression of fluidity, and at the same time there is a vagueness and generality of description which we might think of as archetypal. The movement of the verse is itself fluid and rather lightly accented, and there is an emphasis on liquids and sibilants linked together with long vowel sounds:

> There is no rule here
> No season and no misery
> There are only our desires
> Revealed in the mist.

Certainly the writing may not escape a certain "poetic" quality in its idiom, and yet such effects are needed for the theme, since they create a kind of soft-focus effect appropriate to the idea of an aquatic world: a vagueness of outline suggests continuous transformations moving silently in a self-contained, partly mysterious and partly hidden realm.

Yet a moment later the sinister suggestion we noted is dissipated. Instead there is a lightness and a playfulness suddenly, with again some of the same liquid and fluent word music:

> Your hair is mingled with little children
> Laughing in the moonlight
> Butterflies have come to rest upon your lips...

We can feel a welling up of delight in these lines, one which seems to arise spontaneously and to come from nowhere. Indeed the emphasis on this specific emotion is significant. Delight has something unstructured about it; it is a playful dallying and not an intense and focused passion. The transformation of energies suggested in the poem is in fact a libidinal one, that is to say, an active and pleasure-seeking one. The energies which circulate in the body build upward in a natural ascent toward consciousness, which does have, as one of its basic ground notes, a fundamental delight in simple existence. In Levinas, for instance, life takes the fundamental form of *enjoyment* in which the libidinal instantiation of flesh engages with itself in a deep, recursive process of self-sensing and self-involvement. 8 This has many modes and many moods, indeed virtually all the tonalities of affective life itself, yet what we call delight is one of the most basic, and here we see a very primitive instance of it as it arises, and rises, like butterflies in warm summer air.

Such images and such a mood bring new worlds of imagination and feeling into view, and so in the next lines we move into a more specifically erotic mode of expression. The poetry becomes obviously sexual, and yet the object of this affection seems still rather alien and distanced, and in fact quite radically so.

You have become so monumental
And I so sleepy.
Water is trickling down your lucid breasts.
In a minute you'll be a shadow
And I a flame in sleep.

One is reminded perhaps of the giantess in Baudelaire's famous sonnet, a female mythic form who looms over the speaker's existence and who yet is addressed in a highly eroticized rhetoric. 9 She is an intimidating tutelary presence, presiding over an initiation, yet remaining foreign and somewhat overwhelming. Here the speaker feels himself reduced to his most essential form -- he is a flame in sleep, an embodied passion pure and simple. Yet this is not in any way a diminishment, and the poem represents this potentially dehumanizing realm of Eros with an absolutely Shelleyan purity. This is part of its power and also part of its "old fashioned" quality.

And yet, what is a flame in sleep? It must be the fundamental relationship one has with one's own physical embodiment as that is itself an object of desire, whether one's own, in a narcissistic mode, or another's. One might recall the idea of primary narcissism, which Freud saw as derived from the intrauterine life of the fetus and as being reproduced, in adult life, in sleep. We might see the poem as, in a sense, remaining within the self-enclosure this narcissism creates. The question then is similar to the one asked by Lacan. What are the dynamics by which such an inherently involuted system as human affectivity and awareness can be made to encounter what is radically other to it? We cannot expect detailed psychoanalytic answers from a poet, and yet we might find the process itself dramatized. The remaining few poems we will look at seem to mark out a process of gradual externalization. We move -- haltingly perhaps and with many

hesitations and diversions -- outward toward the other and also into the realm of the contingent, into the openness of time and mortality.

THE WHITE WALL

The mermaids have come to the desert

The mermaids have come to the desert
They are setting up a boudoir next to the camel
who lies at their feet of roses

A wall of alabaster is drawn over their heads
by four rainbow men
whose naked figures give off a light
that slowly wriggles upon the sands

I am touched by the marvelous
as the mermaids' nimble fingers go through my hair
that has come down forever from my head
to cover my body:
a savage fruit of lunacy

Behold, the boudoir is flying away
and I am holding onto the leg of the lovely one
called beneath the sea
BIANCA
She is turning
with the charm of a bird
into two giant lips
as I drink from the goblet of suicide

She is the angelic doll turned black
She is the child of broken elevators
She is the curtain of holes you never want to throw away
She is the first woman and the first man
and I am lost to have her

I am looking for the region
where the smoke of your hair is think
where you are again climbing over the white wall
where your eardrums play music
to the cat that crawls in my eyes
I am recalling memories of you BIANCA

I am looking beyond the hour and the day
to find you BIANCA

This poem, like so many other earlier pieces, is one of erotic quest, and so its enigmas are offset by this itinerary, as well as by a certain elegant drafting in the way the boundaries of its symbolic landscape are marked out. In the opening two stanzas a scene is set: we find a desert and, as though contained within it, a boudoir; there is also a wall of alabaster, which, since it is "drawn over their heads," seems to establish an upward limit. By this means we are prepared for an opposite movement, descent. The rhythms are as yet rather prosaic, in keeping with a predominantly declarative tone. So far the poem's mode of imagination, with boudoirs in the desert and mermaids with feet of roses is that of the grotesque fanciful, reminiscent of Dali. The agitations of Masson, the eeriness of Tanguy, the sublime and stormy romanticism of Dorothea Tanning are absent. Instead there is a certain stasis, and a manipulation of traditional emblems, rather than a movement of clearly seen or vigorously constructed images. With the third stanza there is a quickening of pace and a greater animation of rhythm, which begins to spill from line to line in a run-on movement. Yet it does not present a clearly rendered externality, and the imagery retains its somewhat contrived character. Nonetheless, this animation brings forces we might see as internal to the subject into a more fluid and active relation as it creates the mimesis of a kind of excitement and quickening. The boudoir, in fact, is flying away.

The object of this excitement, however, Bianca, remains an enigma. Is she a woman? Perhaps she is, but she is also a fish, or a bird. At one point she even appears to be a giant clam, since she has two giant lips. She is associated, therefore, with the life of the undersea world, even in its more monstrous embodiments. The sexual symbolism is obvious, and perhaps it is slightly disturbing: the poem becomes an encounter not only with what is compelling but also with what is troubling or threatening. The speaker is overcome by the strangeness of what he sees, and as a result he drinks from the goblet of suicide. I do not take this to mean that he commits suicide or that he dies, but that, in a kind of withdrawal, he adopts a position somewhat removed from the context where these transformations are occurring. That which moves restlessly through an endless self-metamorphosis in the depths of the watery element (perhaps bringing forth grotesque manifestations at times) can only be life itself, either as it exists in the world at large, or, more relevantly, as it exists within an individual. We might think of these metamorphoses, therefore, as figuring the libidinal life as it arises out of the biological selfhood. In fact, though Bianca is characterized by somewhat grotesque figures, she does not seem to be a clearly objective figure nor entirely distinct from the speaker himself. She is a dispersed and elusive presence, almost a kind of medium through which he gropes (at one point he is holding onto her leg). Yet the poem's subject is not merely the excitement of the marvelous and the manifestation of desire nor the difficulty of approaching the true foreignness of the other. It also touches on the relation of the human to the non-human which the human yet bears within itself and which it cannot escape. What becomes of that marvelous excitement and the hope it engenders when they encounter the strangeness of the physical, and when that strangeness is in fact an

inescapable condition of this very excitement and this rapt discovery? The human uneasiness with sexuality is therefore another part of the theme, though it is expressed in a muted way, and not so much tonally as by means of these grotesque metaphors. How can human beings tolerate their own sexuality? And how can they tolerate the fact that this sexuality is so bound up with their affective and imaginative life? And both of these questions must necessarily bear upon their ability to relate to others *as others*.

Certainly there is a marked intensity in the next part of the poem, one which purges from it the vestiges of literary poeticisms which had clung to its style till this point. There is a culmination of sorts in the incantatory repetitions of the next stanza, in which Bianca, the white one, is characterized in the detached phrases of obsession: she is the angelic doll turned black -- black as though after having been tossed into a fire, the Heraclitean element which annihilates every instance of the erotic, but which is also inseparable from it. The image is a shard of loss inserted into the poem's lush texture. Yet in addition to such loss, the erotic introduces us to a further power, *confusion*, one created by the multiple possibilities which crowd our dreams and our waking imagination, soliciting desire, yet making a labyrinth of it. The child of broken elevators is the elusive denizen of this labyrinth. One seeks out her image in the street, where she is found in an urchin, a runaway, or a prostitute, all Romantic archetypes, yet fabled denizens, too, of the Urban, the site of erotic modernity. In a later piece celebrating the Beloved in more explicitly erotic terms, we find the speaker haunted, despite the possession he there enjoys, by doubles and by phantoms:

> I find myself smoking the dust of myself
> hurled to the twilight
> where we were born from the womb of invisible children
> ["The Talisman"]

Thus the erotic quest inhabits the mirror realms of narcissism. Yet in addition there is the elusive nature of what is sought and the bewildering context in which one seeks -- the internal labyrinth of desire as it emerges from its biological context -- itself disturbing and grotesque -- emerges, that is to say, coded in dreams and in speech and circulating along the surfaces of the libidinal body in endless transformations. What finally does one want to possess? In this piece, the elusive object is also "The curtain of holes you never want to throw away." This wonderful image, expressing the obsessive repetitions of desire and its ultimate dispersal in emptiness, itself disperses, like smoke from a cigarette as the incantation breaks like a wave upon the stanza's final lines. Here we learn that Bianca is the first woman and the first man: she includes both genders as well as the principle of Eros that unites them. The speaker says that he is lost to have her. A revised version of the poem published in 1966 alters the line to "I am lost in the search to have her." Either way, the impossibility of having her indicates that she is not an individual but a power, and that in seeking this he is taken, beyond expectation perhaps, to a kind of limit.

To approach this limit is to approach a catastrophe of some kind, and the poem verges on incoherence at this point. He has a cat in his eyes; Bianca's eardrums play music. Yet where? In the region where one might be climbing over the white wall. The white wall is the face of nature considered as an obstacle to my desires, a place where I endure separation from what I need and want. It is the unyielding surface placed opposite the isolated subjectivity. Yet it is also the inherent fragility and limitation of all semiotic codes. Is it possible for something to appear outside of the economies imposed by nature?

And likewise outside of the economies we impose upon ourselves? In a sense it is, and what appears is therefore the excess, the surplus, which takes the hallucinatory form of the Beloved, and which glimmers in his or her face, expression, and body. What appears is "the look" in Lacan's sense. For Lacan vision is a desire, a craving, but what it seeks is not a specific object, a sum of data, nor a sign to which it would affix an interpretation. It seeks the look, the gaze. The look is not part of the order of nature, therefore; the investigations of the natural scientist will not disclose its defining characteristics nor create a description that will contain it. It likewise is not part of the semiotic system of codes which govern social behavior, since it does not search in its environment for a sign or for a signal to interpret, nor for aggregates of signs or sequences of signals. It is not concerned with interpretation. For interpretation inevitably involves itself in questions of truth and falsehood, accuracy and inaccuracy. But the look, driven by desire, by craving, is not concerned with truth and can have no concept of accuracy. Now it is true that the Beloved's face and figure are themselves coded, yet in their very embodiment they exceed the codes which seek to govern them and create the impetus for the genesis of other and special ones. The encounter with the person of the Beloved --and often, of course, it is with some particular part -- face or hair -- is always strange, arresting, inherently dramatic and provocative. Perhaps it is also fated to disappointment or disaster.

To climb over the white wall is therefore to attempt an escape from the various and despotic restricted economies (to use Bataille's term), whether of nature or of the orderings of capital. 10 Through such attempts one creates either an "elsewhere" of greater freedom and creative potential or else one falls into a mere dispersal, a state of

disintegration, or perhaps, more specifically, of repetition compulsion. The poem's conclusion seems to suggest this last fate, relegating the speaker to continuing search both in time and in the atemporal realm of dream, desire, and fantasy, "beyond the hour and the day." Is there really a possibility of something more? Is the creative possible within the realm of the erotic? And thus is freedom possible there? Or can it show itself only in the alternative of art, and must the erotic itself always remain a realm of unfreedom, a realm of human bondage? Is this not the crucial question in current debates regarding sexuality and gender? It is remarkable to consider that the author was fifteen years old when he wrote this poem; and yet its vision is already dark, even desperate, despite a certain adolescent bravado expressed in images of apocalypse and creative madness.

Whatever the answer to these questions may be, what we find in this phase of Lamantia's work is a vision of subjectivity as a condition of hauntings, mirrorings, and narrow circuits driven and tormented by a power which is both of its own nature and yet foreign to it as well. Even the most hectic encounters with the other take the form of doublings and uncanny reciprocities, and even when one seems to approach the outside in extreme or in ecstatic moments, there is the constant pull backward toward the subjective and repetitive source. This state of enclosure has, in this poem, a more active and excited character than what we had seen in "Awakened from Sleep," because here it is less complete and the possibility of encounter and union with an otherness has dawned within it, albeit only elusively, and yet powerfully enough to create the turbulence we have noted.

THE OUTSIDE

BLUE LOCUS

It’s here the glove attacks the hand
Everything is splendidly distant
Your torso carved out of daylight
On the screaming horizon I’ve ceased to hear
Because you secrete a whisper and the clouds tremble.

The squirrel you feed is the familiar of halos
Trailing your thoughts from the spirit lake
Blue locus
Promising the unknown on a hike to the woods

There must be a playroom of totems
Under the lake you raise with the key by which you read my lips
On the fur road you travel
I’m to steal the squirrel’s eye
...which is how the sun looks when asleep...
and nail it over the photoglyph
in the space where you’ve cropped your head off

I want to play fanatically over your daylight
See the thunder-bridge return to the font
And bring you to where the dream emanates
Through the paper shackling reality
Full optics
Drenched with the juice of chance

O my lady of combustible cameo
Your mouth of the northern lights
Doubt’s ease
And our blistering profanations

No more answers
You are writing the poem
Who burn me with your shadow
That your body veils wet arrows
The birds circle you
Breastplates
For the army of love

In this poem we find once again the conceit of the Beloved accompanied by the aura or nimbus. Here, however, we begin in a relatively clear location, an outdoors characterized by the imagery of distance, light, and clarity. We see from the start a more forceful and dramatic approach in the language itself, quite apart from the sharper imagery. The movement of the lines has its own incisiveness: there are four heavy stresses in the first in a sound pattern which is swifter and more clipped than we had seen in "Awakened from Sleep," for example. Here the language is more marked by consonants, as opposed to a persistently extended vowel music. Likewise the pacing is more rapid: a line like "Everything is splendidly distant" has a running and swift quality, as though perception were just now catching up with some striking event which occurred just before the poem's opening.

In the next lines we see what this is: her sudden appearance against the horizon. There is an atmosphere of *breakthrough*. Ordinary perception is disrupted by this singular event, an epiphanic arrival. And yet this had been prepared for at the very outset. The enigmatic first line, for instance, can be understood as referring to a situation in which a normal reciprocity -- in this case the relationship of glove and hand -- is suddenly reversed. If the feminine is that which contains and encompasses the masculine in an intimate association, then in this figure we can see a sudden breaking apart of this

fostering and tutelary arrangement. 11 There is a rupture. What had been near, as near as my own skin, is suddenly far, and yet not in a mode of alienation. It is this sudden distancing which enables me to see and to be seen, and thus to enter into a heightened and more conscious relationship. This distance is needed for the fullest possible opening of vision; it is distance itself which now streams with the energies of the sun, an energy bounded only by the horizon which has become an active power rather than a limit, screaming forth the energies of disruption and of separation which are released in this sudden salience, this coming forth and coming apart. Is there an energy of separation specifically? We realize that of course there is; it is called birth. The birth of the momentous creates a new world, or a transfiguration of this one, a change so encompassing that it cannot be seen in any particular detail but permeates the whole, which is now numinous, active, and mobilized in an unprecedented way.

Perhaps for this reason the poem's focus shifts from the visible to the aural. In fact vision itself is transformed through a kind of synaesthesia into the apocalyptic mode of hearing. For hearing registers more fully and in a more participatory way the change of being the subject witnesses and yet also undergoes. He is in fact caught up in this change, and therefore his moods are highly variable, moving from exaltation to fear. There is something droll and amusing about the first line itself: "It's here the glove attacks the hand" -- a typical piece of surrealist wit. Yet the four lines following do indeed have something frightening about them; it is partly due to the startling metaphor of the screaming horizon, yet also in part to the surprising way the distant and simplified form that he sees there "secrete[s] a whisper." Even amid these apocalyptic splendors there is this secret affinity between the speaker and this visionary Other. Even in this context

there is yet an erotics, though one expressed by means of distance rather than proximity. This is itself an old theme: that of the look which passes between Lady and courtier, of the glimpse of the Beloved from a distance, of the first encounter of Dante and Beatrice followed then by her later gaze upon him in which he finds it impossible to entertain base thoughts. In the imagination of Eros, space is repeatedly turned into a medium through which complex actions-at-a-distance are enacted and experienced. Yet these experiences are startling rather than pleasant; they are elections and not intimacies. For this reason there must be a turning toward greater proximity, though this may need to happen over a sequence of stages.

The second stanza is quieter, therefore, the object more close at hand and familiar. She is no longer the frightening apparition but rather a companion. Yet her origin from Beyond is still palpable: she is the familiar of halos, and her thoughts have their provenance in the infinite, itself the origin and the goal of all desire. It is this which is the blue locus, a metaphor for the sky and yet also for that Beyond, that elsewhere of desire, the place where it would have its entire and absolute fulfillment, if only it could reach it. The poem at this point is a bridge spanning this abyss separating that infinity from the homely “hike to the woods.” What is the nature of this spanning and of this tension? How can the infinity of desire be instantiated in a finite, and always fragile human being? Certainly this is one of the essential Surrealist questions, as it is, likewise, of so much western philosophy from Plato to Lacan. What is the nature of the human, if this possession by the infinity of desire is one of its essential facts? 12

We will not find an answer, but we may find dramatization and description. We see that there is a playroom of totems beneath a lake -- a wonderful metaphor for the

unconscious -- yet it is merely that, a playroom. This image of playful subversion is in keeping with the idea that she raises this lake with a key. For this supplies the poem with an image of gradualism and control. Those things which overwhelm the human -- the infinite, the unconscious, the Beyond, the excess -- are actually powers out of which the human itself is formed, carved out of their dark light. This is what the poem would persuade one of. And yet it also knows that they threaten to submerge it in their *informe*, which neither culture nor passion can use or tolerate. 13 Is it she who extends this bridge, or is it the poet who creates it? Is he a master of his vision and of his creativity, or is he rather subject to the intensive states that pass through him in the presence of the uncanny and the overwhelming? Certainly that was how things were at the outset. Even now it is she who extends to him the key which raises the lake, which, nonetheless, is nothing other than the libidinal reserve of passion latent in the body itself. Yet in the middle of the third stanza there is a reversal. He takes control, wishes to steal an eye from the squirrel -- certainly one of the most active organs in nature -- making of it a kind of alternative sun which he affixes to that spot where she has somehow lost her head. It is an image -- the headless woman -- which recalls numerous works of art, works which have come to us damaged in their historical passage. Like them she is more a presence than a person, and like them she bears a mysterious power; in their case it is Art, which they bear forward against Time itself, as though against the waves of a sea which has broken upon them and damaged them, though only partly. In her case the power is Eros, and perhaps that of the body itself, and then also Beauty, or, rather, the Marvelous, the always incarnate and specific beauty revealed by chance and by the moment; these she bears against a different and more mundane negation than the passage of centuries and of ages;

it is a spatial one rather than a temporal power, and it operates in nearness rather than at a remove. It is, quite simply, the habitual intercourse of glove and hand, for they obscured her splendor in daily intimacies and ordinary routine. These are what she has overcome in this very moment, as likewise in the previous one of even more startling epiphany, attaining once again her proper beauty and her somewhat forbidding splendor. These he must subdue once more, and so assimilate them to his own subjective economy. Therefore, in a gesture which is a little like painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa, the poet affixes his squirrel eye/anti-sun to her. He takes charge of the moment and of the desire which must arise within him in its wake. He does this in a slightly self-mocking way, it is true, and indeed he makes discrete fun of the very sublimity of his own language and of the figures he has been using all along. Yet still there is a gesture of assertion, and the tone, though slightly self-mocking, serves the purpose of creating an occasion for humor and amusement (it is not seriously self-undermining). This is brought about through this slight jocularity which in fact animates the language in a special way, as wind does the leaves of a tree, adjusting the level of formality a little bit up or down, lengthening a rhythm here or shortening one there, so that the tone and stylistic register remain just ever so slightly unpredictable, just ever so slightly more active and shifting than one might expect. This very tone is part of the process by which he subdues her power; it is a mode of assimilation, one which yet allows the assimilated -- her, her beauty, her otherness -- to remain themselves apart, inviolate, and separate. This may be a paradox, and yet it is the essence of festivity, for in festivity that which is Other is brought toward me and into me, while yet I recognize its fundamental difference and independence and allow that difference to manifest itself within that space, the arena of

festival. Thus, the god is consumed, while yet remaining the god. The ritual exists to allow this paradox to resonate, to *be* the very space of its resonating. 14 The mood of festivity may thus be grave and solemn, but it may also be riotous or humorous, for there is an essential absurdity in the paradox of both acknowledging the independence of something and yet appropriating it. In addition, there is a lingering sense of human finitude. Together these tend to provoke laughter, a sublime laughter not incompatible with the sacred. It is this laughter and its giddiness that create the tonal lability of Lamantia's style in this piece as likewise in others. But one finds it also in so many other examples of surrealist art. In this case, jocularity is the expression of an ecstatic hope -- that one might be joined with the Beloved while neither violating her sovereignty nor being oneself violated by its overwhelming power. And yet there is perhaps an intimacy already implied in the use of this very humor, and the very stylistic freedom is itself and indication that the distance between Lover and Beloved had somehow already been bridged. A giddy instability of tone and register indicates a special kind of freedom, one which acknowledges the sublimity of an Otherness while yet wanting to remain in contact with it and not to be released from the intensity of such a relationship in any way.

The mood of festivity implies sharing, and so daylight is shared by both in the next stanza. It remains hers, however; and yet at the same time the speaker thinks of wanting to return her to where the dream emanates. He continues to see her as a manifestation of this larger force, this reserve which has the capacity to break through the reality which would shackle one with its paper, that is to say, its paper money and its paper forms to be filled out. Rather than submit to this paper world he continues to seek the vision of full optics, fully aware that the encounter with it is an encounter with

something he cannot really possess, that it is something given -- like inspiration or like thought itself -- fortuitously, and only under the right conditions. In this case, these are the conjunction of two lives, of two selves, of two bodies. Limiting and bridging are thus the poem's ongoing concerns. They create a maturation of vision and a tempering of it which then, by this very means, becomes a descent to embodiment itself, which then becomes the final and specific focus of the work. And there is indeed a frankly embodied character to the concluding figure. She eases his doubts and is also the occasion of their (the couple's) blistering profanations -- a splendid epithet for the sexual act itself, a phrase at once violent and yet marked by a civil formality and indirectness which intensifies its frank sexuality, a stylistic achievement we might think of as characteristically French. And yet despite this specificity, this finitude, she still has a smile of the northern lights, an aura suggesting a beyond, the source of her beauty, which yet is enjoyed here and now.

THE WORK AGAINST TIME

THE TALISMAN

Only for those who love is dawn visible throughout the day
And kicks over the halo at the pit of ocean
The diamond whirls
All that's fixed is volatile
And the crushed remnants of sparrows travel without moving

I find myself smoking the dust of myself
Hurled to the twilight
Where we were born from the womb of invisible children
So that even the liver of cities
Can be turned into my amulet of laughing bile

Melted by shadows of love
I constellate love with teeth of fire
Until any arrangement the world presents
To the eyes at the tip of my tongue
Becomes the perfect food of constant hunger

Today the moon was visible at dawn
To reflect o woman the other half of me you are
Conic your breasts gems of the air
Triangle your thighs delicate leopards in the wood where you wait

In "The Talisman," the poet affirms the power of erotic love over what he views as its main antagonist, time and the temporal passage of nature. The poem starts as a pure affirmation in the form of an epigram. It seeks for something to inscribe upon memory, a fundamental truth which might otherwise be forgotten. The reason for this forgetting is in

the third line: the diamond here is the manifold processes of nature itself. Though the diamond is usually a symbol of permanence, here it is given an opposite significance; it is the glittering, multi-faceted change we witness and undergo. We might think of Valery's similar use of the same image (albeit in a poem totally dissimilar in style) in "Le Cimitiere Marin," where he speaks of "Maints diamonds d'imperceptible l'ecume." 15 The next line clarifies this vision with another epigram and then, in a movement parallel to what was seen in the first two lines, immediately provides a more overtly surrealist restatement. Yet the last line also exhibits a violence in its imagery which conveys the speaker's sense of the ultimate significance of what he contemplates. Valery's glittering diamond reduces creatures to crushed remnants at last. Yet the memorialization of love, which any writing of it is, and which perhaps all writing is, stands in opposition to this. This oppositional power is available only to the initiated, however, those for whom dawn is visible throughout the day (thus the appropriateness of cryptic epigrams and the surrealist style itself). As though in counterpoint to this hopeful principle, the speaker reminds himself that all that's fixed is volatile. Yet he persists in believing that the first power will overcome the second. There is no question of proving this, of course, and yet he attempts to show us how it is possible, and as though from within the experience itself. Thus he presents not an argument but a highly compressed description of subjectivity attempting to renew itself through love.

In contrast to the first stanza which proceeds in a more measured pace, as though to set its epigrams in place before moving forward, the second stanza is a more characteristically surrealist rush of images and metaphors. We are indeed placed in "the space within" as Michaux might put it. Yet it seems to throw the speaker backward in a

sense; he is no longer the confident visionary of love but rather hurled to the twilight, a liminal space where he awaits his true nature and his true calling, which is to rescue Love from time. And yet it is as if memory has temporarily abducted him. At the same time, these shadows are themselves enigmatic and perhaps active presences. As we move into the third line -- hurled into it actually by the previous one whose rhythmic cast places such emphatic weight on that powerful word, "hurled" and whose shortness creates not a mere enjambment but rather a sharp, precipitous turn -- we have to wonder about their nature, as likewise that of this twilight and this space itself. Perhaps to smoke one's own dust means to avoid being devoured by the past, by memory and by the tendency of existence at any moment to be, at certain levels, a retrospect of the previous moment. Rather one must strive to be ahead of one's life, or at least of its mere temporal career, as a flame is suspended somewhat above the match's tip. This forward orientation means burning up one's past, making what would be a kind of trace or trail -- dust -- the fuel for a creative movement into the future. Can memory have this creative and impulsive, rather than nostalgic, character? Perhaps. It is interesting to imagine Lamantia's twilight as a kind of corridor in existence, somewhat to the side of the everyday world, a secret passage leading not backward in time but elsewhere in orientation, where one might adopt a perspective on one's life and its temporality that would not subject it to a continual and essentially economic assessment, a measuring and a counting, a weighing of gain against loss. In order to do this, one must defeat the time lines and schedules which most of us have in our heads. The stanza moves deviously, therefore; and we move with it into a kind of eddy aside from the main current of life in order then to rejoin it more forcefully in the last two and a half lines.

To be borne from the womb of invisible children is to recreate oneself in the essential newness of every moment and within the context of a privacy which is equally primitive and inviolate: this is why they are invisible children; they cannot be seen by others, and likewise this continual self-creation is something that one does only in the depth of one's essential isolation. Yet here it is shared, remarkably, and perhaps improbably, with the Beloved. This provides us with one definition of love: it is that relationship in which such self-creation and renewal can to some degree overcome its inherent privacy and be shared with another. Normally it would be an affair of desires and dreams and of whatever practical action one would attempt to take in one's life -- in habit, in personal conduct, in one's interaction with others, perhaps in politics. Yet the union between lovers is so profound that they come to share each other's dreams and to become each other's desires. They therefore renew each other, becoming each other's genesis, each other's origin, perhaps in a sense each other's parent (though in this respect there is certainly a negative potential for regression). Yet here this union is quite simply a source of strength which is able to overcome even the most negative contexts. For certainly cities are the livers of society or have become so -- these factory-like structures which take this and produce that. And is not the liver one of the largest and in a sense most earthen of the body's organs? Yet these gross economies can be dealt with, if not mastered, by the imagination fueled by its own inherent desires. The result in this case is the fiery element of bile. This bile, though fiery, is not angry but laughing, just as Blake's Albion is laughing in the midst of his dance. The amulet of laughing bile is therefore a rather witty epithet for a poem, or for any work of art, since it is at once a shaped artifact

and yet made of something fluid, unfixed and inherently reactive, in this case the unpredictable surrealist associations of images and tropes.

Smoking the dust of oneself turns out to be an image distantly derived from the myth of the phoenix, and the connection with the Beloved turns out to be an ongoing redemption of memory: because of her it need not take one away from the present, but can be a source of renewal. One's relationship with oneself is not one of mere repetition but of repetition forward, the creation of newness out of what was, of novelty out of apparent sameness. Yet this relationship of possibility in relation to one's past is only possible in the context of an ongoing connection to *her*. A talisman is a reminder, a keepsake; it speaks of the past. Yet this talisman is the daylight moon, and so it is a reminding forward into the new day. We see that the underlying thought of the poem is not dissimilar to what one finds in the famous lines at the end of *Faust* where "das Ewig Weibliche/ zieht uns hinan." 16 The poem expresses this despite the disruption of its idiom and the disjunctiveness of its metaphors. It is possible, therefore, to inhabit the incoherence and the unsupervised nature of experience in the post-modern era -- unsupervised in the sense that one's imagination in its associational flux is likely to go anywhere, unsupervised also in the sense that the market, the condition of one's existence, is likely to as well -- and to do this in a way whose idealistic hope might almost seem outmoded. And yet it is just barely possible though not possible to do it by oneself.

The third stanza, however, has a different focus. There is a movement away from past and the future. It inhabits the present and the world of essences -- of sensations seen as revelatory in the phenomenological manner -- as these can be organized within a

present moment, a charged *now*. The very first word is "melted," a past participle, and so there is, even in the language's relation to temporality, a kind of sinking back. The process we speak of has already occurred, or at least it has already started. We catch it underway, and we are behind it by only a slight pause, the slightest in fact, like the interval between one breath and another. This is a necessary spacing, for it is only after such a preparatory interval that we catch Being off guard and sense impressions in their germination. In this present which is not so much a moment as a kind of dimension or capacity, the poet's erotic involvement creates the underlying enthusiasm which allows him to meet the whole of the physical world with a spirit of appreciation and enjoyment. The metaphor of having eyes at the tip of one's tongue is a grotesque image in the manner of Dali or Ernst, and it suggests a generalized sensibility capable of appreciating all dimensions of experience. This state is the background disposition out of which any particular moment, erotic or otherwise, would be known and felt in the fullest sense. There is an exceeding of the Beloved, a surpassing of her in the direction of a more general participation in the life of the senses, the revolutionary gnosis of perception itself. And yet the poem remains an erotic poem nonetheless and concludes on a note of desire anticipating its sure fulfillment.

THE ELEMENTAL

There is possession in "The Talisman" of sorts, and in addition there is participation not only in the life of another but an enlarged participation in one's own life too across the modes of its temporality and in its very engagement with the earthly

elements themselves. And yet there is also a recognition that this is partial and always endangered -- by time. Yet the realm of the erotic life is not like that of law, possession is not nine tenths of it. Quite the opposite. We conclude therefore with a parable about giving up the self and giving up possession, relinquishing oneself to the dispersal of death and to a union not with the Beloved but with the elemental out of which one's life was originally composed.

A WINTER DAY

In the rose creeping into the tower of exiles
When the buffet is laden with jewels
When the night is filled with hate
When the womb of eros is deserted
When the sleeping men are awakened
When the old lovers are no longer frightened
-- my heart

the old women come down playing on the lawns
of the intangible murderers
the women are mine
Your eye is so smooth in the sunlight
You are no longer a child
You are old
Spider of the blind
Insolent mother
Do you care for my young hair
I want to lay the fibers of my heart over your face

It is a strange moment
As we tear ourselves apart in the silence
Of this landscape
Of this whole world
That seems to go beyond its own existence
You roll so beautifully over my bones
That have shaken off the flesh of their youth
My nakedness is never alarming
It is this way I adore you

Your hands with crystals shining into the night

Pass through my blood
And sever the hands of my eyes

We have come to a place where the nightingales sleep
We are filling the oceans and the plains
With the old images of our phosphorescent bones

In this poem, one of the most successful and eerie of the early pieces, the speaker moves in the direction of a suicidal abnegation of the self. Yet what could prompt such an attitude? The poem divides into two parts. The first is comprised of the first stanza alone. It sets up a condition, describes it, and then proposes a terse response: "– my heart." Each line describes a negative circumstance: for the buffet to be laden with jewels is in fact negative, since jewels cannot be eaten. Conditioned by our society, we are inclined to think of them as desirable, yet this only indicates how our natural wisdom has been corrupted. Likewise it is wrong for old lovers to no longer be frightened: their lack of fright is merely an indication of their age and weariness or cynicism. In the nature of things, they should be frightened, for the erotic encounter is a rending experience. Each line, therefore, presents a version of what we might think of as worldly corruption or cynicism: to hunger for the sterility of jewels, which are a metaphor for either vanity or greed, to court hate rather than love and isolation rather than union. Likewise to value wakefulness rather than sleep is a mistake, contrary to what the industrious Protestant might think. For sleep is the gateway to dreaming, which puts us in touch with the inner and creative heart of the world, as well as with our psyches, delivering us to that place where the two are one. All these mistakes, these follies, exist somehow "inside the rose," which has crept into the tower of exiles. The rose is itself one's heart, one's mind, and for this reason these mistakes are continual temptations, not only because the world

perversely values them rather than the truth, although it does, but more because they are internal to one's nature. In *its* rose, they are built-in cankers. To understand this nature, we need look no further than the word "exiles". To be exiled is to be separated, yet more than that, exile imposes a containment; in the land of one's birth one had moved about freely, yet the exile is limited by foreign languages and foreign customs. In one's native land, one mingled easily with others. Yet exile imposes solitude and a kind of immurement in oneself. Exile is a metaphor, therefore, expressing a mode of being characterized by stasis and separation. The stanza's somewhat stiff line-by-line composition itself conveys this, with one perception per line, each starting with the same word, each clearly end-stopped. I interpret the elided phrase of the last line to be something like "beware of this, my heart." Or perhaps, "flee from this."

But what can lead one out of it? The rest of the poem dramatizes this process, as the speaker gives himself up to Whitman's fierce old mother. She makes her first appearance in plural form, as a kind of chorus of old women, of crones. Yet despite their strangeness they do not frighten him. In a remarkable reversal of tropes, the chorus of norns, of fates, does not inspire dread, fear, or disgust but rather is taken account of calmly, as though their arrival had been expected. There is an uncanny ease about it all, and one is almost reminded of the parable by Kafka in which the repeated desecration of a sanctuary is finally anticipated and made part of the service itself. The catastrophe is disarmed somehow if it is anticipated and worked into the economy of our myth, the myth being nothing other than our life. And yet this does not mean that one controls one's fate. Rather one cooperates with it to create something larger than oneself, the image of the human as ecstatic existence. Accordingly there is a single and singular being

which now confronts the speaker, and he addresses her. She is the image of the Melusine, now no longer a child but rather old. She is the anima that had led one on in the searches of youth; later she took form as the Beatrice-like figure that enraptures one and inspires a vision of transcendence. Now in her age she arrives to bestow a more accurate vision of that transcendence, or perhaps one would rather say that she provides the image of it appropriate to this stage of life, for this youth is in some sense already old, or at least he has allowed himself to be drawn out to the edge, to the very rim of his life. (Perhaps it is the goblet of suicide that he had mentioned previously.) She is not the fierce old mother herself, of course, but he recognizes her as her manifestation or emissary. For the mother is the web in its totality and she, the young Melusine now old, is the spider inhabiting this web. Here we might recall the spider web image in "Awakened from Sleep". 17 We see now the later stage of the cycle alluded to in that poem. Thus the speaker renounces facets, layers of himself as though they were clothing he no longer needed. Indeed he ends up quite naked, yet it is not the nakedness of Eros. There is an eeriness in the poem from this point on. Seldom does one encounter a representation of self-relinquishment more candid and more effortless. Similar moments in Whitman seem blustery by comparison. In a figure reminiscent of the Samson story he offers his young hair and then, quite calmly, all the rest of himself. He strips off his entire being ply after ply until only bones are left. It is a strange moment, as the poem itself says in a moment of self-commentary which increases its uncanny, unearthly tone. At such a moment, the world seems to go beyond its own existence. This is a weirdly precise description of the idea of the surpassing of existence by itself in an ecstatic condition. And it is indeed the condition of the world itself, which now is made clear to the speaker in a moment of

insight as nearly free of emotion as it is lucid. Yet is it possible for humans themselves to aspire to this state of self-exceeding, and so to be part of this world in the deepest and truest sense? It is after all a strangely *silent* landscape, and this silence seems somewhat sinister and funereal. At this point, we notice an ambiguity in the poem. The mythical figure of the second stanza seems to give way a bit and a figure who would seem to be a mere human lover appears. The speaker seems to be addressing his counterpart in the lines "It is a strange moment/ As we tear ourselves apart in the silence," for who else would be torn by this whole process except a human lover, someone like himself? Yet in the very next stanza the woman addressed seems again to recede into the mythical. She rolls beautifully over his bones and his nakedness, lacking flesh and hair, is his way of adoring her. Her hands are crystals and pass through his blood, and, in a strange yet apt figure, they sever the hands of his eyes, as though his eyes were clocks and she were dismantling them, undoing his life, his time, and his ability to see all at once. We might guess that the poem is attempting to say that if humans can relinquish themselves to the elemental, it must be in a more indirect way than what had seemed to be taking place till now in the poem, for there cannot really be a self-relinquishment to death directly. The idea is a mythical motif, certainly, but not an experience we can actually live. And yet it is an equally ancient idea that in the sexual encounter we perhaps touch upon this. Here we see the reason for that glimmering of the realistic, that sudden suggestion of an actual human lover, within the mythical encounter, and the continued presence of such brief suggestions of the realistic within an otherwise mythical landscape. Both realms are present in the poem because both are needed to give a full account of the erotic, which is always an affair of real acts and actual persons and at the same time an affair of

memories, inherited myths and of *topoi* revisited, and so the poem's style wavers between actual and mythical. Thus, the woman addressed appears to be a human lover once again at the end, for both his bones and hers are left like traces on the earth. United in death, they arrive at a place presided over by the nightingale, that emblem of nocturnal *ekstasis* in which the listening soul is transported to a *beyond* somewhere in the fecund depths of the night itself.

We might say that Eros is finally presented in the poem in two ways: the *saying* of the actual relational experience of the erotic is combined with the *said* of myth. 17 The speaker offers himself to the other, yet also to the final other, which can only be death. And whether it is true that one embraces death as one embraces the Beloved, we see that the poem presents this idea in a uniquely calm way, indeed with a kind of visionary calm. It is as though its truth were too evident to be surprising. The style of representation, in fusing the mythical and the actual, also fuses two ultimate values -- quite simply, that of death and life. Yet it would seem that death and the mythical predominate, that the *said* dominates the *saying*, that the past, and time, and their mythical crystallizations impend over the ecstatic release of the present, even in the presence of the Beloved. This vision is the source of the darkness and eeriness that hang over the poem. Yet perhaps the fact that there is a release actually *into* death is itself a factor by which a newness and a present can be inscribed against the constant presence of myth and the *it was* of temporality. And so it may be that in embracing death itself, the speaker gains the ability to embrace the present and the Beloved, despite the encroachments of mortal fatigue and the moral corruptions listed in the first stanza and the more elusive antagonists of time itself and *the said*. In a conclusion that recalls Geoffrey Hill's "Genesis," Lover and Beloved, Lover

and Death, are folded together in a kind of phosphorescence, a fire which persists in the midst of the sea, a just perceptible light persisting in decay. The fire of the erotic lives in the moment, yet beyond that it lives also in some sense even in death, though it may not be possible to say exactly how, as Lover and Beloved are fused with nature itself.

CONLUSION

The erotic vision is one of continuities, correspondences, and reciprocities. By these means it connects us with more than merely the body of the Beloved, but with her image as well, that is to say, with the creative unrest she awakens and thus with the complex emotions that seem to exceed their occasion. To some extent he is initiated through her into the experience of being possessed by an emotion, a feeling, an energy which is, from the standpoint of biological and mental life, a pure surplus. His objective then becomes to convey the feeling of this itself, and to manage it, to cultivate it as the basis for a heightened and elaborate code of expression. This very excess and transport becomes a mode of knowledge. It is like fire light illuminating a dark room; it does not itself warm, yet it enables the occupant to explore the room's contents in a way he otherwise would not be able to, and perhaps to rearrange it. Emotion, desire itself, becomes the vehicle for an intense perception of signs, the signs of language, the various

semiotic codes that write out the social space. It may lead then to an intense interrogation of these signs and to a refiguring of them according to the trajectories of desire, of happiness, perhaps of justice. Yet if one is carried beyond the erotic, it may also be that one is carried beyond the human context too. Can the erotic unite one to the body of the world, in the sense of providing a surplus light by which one reads its signs? The poems bring one to the uncanny encounter with the Other, the woman, and yet also introduce the poet to his own powers, to his own body, and to the imagination: body, mind, and senses are awakened, yet also challenged; life is heightened and made more active, yet also shaken and disorganized, changed in fact and opened to a new and uncanny influence that seems to arrive as a disruption from without and at the same time to well up uncontrollably from within. The erotic connects the Lover with more than merely the body of the Beloved, but also with the body of the world. But does one really want to be connected to the body of the world?

NOTES

1 See, for example, Mary Ann Caws

2 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson create a theory of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence as a continually excessive mode of poetry. See *Bataille*, 63-75.

3 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*.

4 Eleanor Kaufman's discussion of the Deleuzian-Klossowskian concept of becomings sees it as a fundamentally non-natural type of self-cultivation. An instance of the antithetical, in Yeats' sense. See her *The Delirium of Praise*, 101-105. for Deleuze and Guattari's concept, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,*trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

5 Mary Ann Caws, for example, in *Andre Breton*.

6 *Totality and Infinity*, 263-265; *Libido*, 67.

7 In *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass.*

8 Yet as Ellie Ragland-Sullivan points out, Lacan objected to this concept in Freud, seeing it as something which would make each individual an enclosed monad. "One of the difficulties that Lacan has found with Freud's idea of primary narcissism...is that this standpoint implies a newborn has no perceptive opening on the exterior world. The logical impasse is obvious: How does one bring a monad enclosed in and upon oneself to the progressive recognition of others?" [32]

9 *Totality and Infinity*

10 *Totality and Infinity*, 110-130.

11 Baudelaire, "La Geante"

12 For an account of the myth of Melusine as employed by Breton, see Anna Balakian, 203-205.

13 Not to suggest that this is the proper role for the feminine, only that the poetry seems to be assuming this rather traditional concept. The feminist re-examination of the Surrealist treatment of women and the feminine has developed an extensive bibliography.

14 Here I echo Badiou's history of Western thought.

15 Valery

16 Goethe.

17 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*.

CHAPTER TWO BLACK: GNOSIS

I

Though the erotic vision is marked by frustrations and by conflicts, its substance is nonetheless joy. The poet's style, both eccentric and exotic from the standpoint of mainstream American literature, is a means of conveying these experiences in all their depth and complexity. Yet the stylized expressions of his passion carry his work past the bounds of love poetry in the narrower sense and lead to an encounter not merely with the Beloved but with the otherness of the world and in fact with death. It is as if a strange fatality operated in the economy of language and imagination moving him toward this darkness. But does one actually want this uncanny union with earthly fatality itself? Albeit we are assured by various mythologies, including psychoanalysis, that it is our ultimate desire. Moreover, is there a negation more severe even than death? Though the erotic exposure of human life entails endless suffering as well as joy, there are deeper sources of suffering still. There is the irremediably negative.

IL Y A...

> There is a nocturnal space, but it is no longer empty space, the transparency which both separates us from things and gives us access to them, by which they are given. Darkness fills it like a content; it is full, but full of the nothingness of everything. Can one speak of its continuity? It is surely uninterrupted. But the points of nocturnal space do not refer to each other as in illuminated space; there is no perspective, they are not situated. There is a swarming of points....
>
> The rustling of the *there is*...is horror. We have noted the way it insinuates itself in the night, as an undetermined menace of space itself disengaged from its function as receptacle for objects, as a means of access to beings. (*Existence* 31-32)

One might feel that the fundamental gesture of Surrealism is to proclaim, in either verbal or pictorial form, the *there is*, the *il y a*. In this visionary proclamation we see its special role among artistic movements, an affirmation of existence as such, beyond all categories, and even beyond rational thought. For prior to the existent there is yet existence itself, and prior to existence there is the enigmatic space of its possibility; this enigma is expressed by Levinas in his recourse to a mere and, as it were mute grammatical phrase, a phrase at once supremely empty and supremely full. What more can be said than this phrase enunciates, *il y a*, there is? And yet though nothing more can be said, much can be shown, and Surrealism undertakes this showing, exhibiting simultaneously the sheer facticity, the primordial enigma, and the relentless fecundity of Being. Because this apprehension is beyond reason, it can only be asserted: it is a pure positing. Therefore, this mentioning, this indicating, is driven not by reason, but by the libidinal power of the dream. Its tool is the image, and its method is the displacement of the image from one context into another. Hence the parasol finds itself linked with the

sewing machine and the rubber glove with the artichoke. The typical subject of Surrealism, therefore, is *enigma*, which it nonetheless presents frontally, boldly, and as though in a joyous wondering. In the erotic mode, this presentation is prompted by the desire for union and lured by its glimmering possibility. Despite the enigmatic context, there is a boldness of representation: the enigmatic is, paradoxically, *exhibited*, placed directly before us. And so we should understand the knowledge we are given as a type of gnosis, a more-than-rational insight into the nature of the world. We are intended to see more than we normally would, to see into and to see beyond the merely factual. In reading Surrealist texts at their most exuberant we might almost feel that we witness the fecundity at the heart of the world, a fecundity that exceeds both being and non-being, an excess and a surplus at the root of all existence and all genesis. Insofar as we absorb this vision, the world is increased, expanded; it proliferates wonderfully in every direction. At the center of such fecundity, as though in the midst of an auratic shimmer, is the Beloved, the Woman, the object of our desiring vision, who now appears as the center of these transformations, and who is certainly the initial if not the ultimate motive for our own excessive desire to link the flow of our language and our imagination with that deep and ultimate process, that primordial solicitation, the flux of being itself, a desire, a writing, leading us just past the bounds of reason. 1

And yet, as Levinas informs us, the rustling of the *il y a* is horror. At the heart of the Surrealist vision is a special type of horror, a special type of shudder; it is not a rustle but a clamor, the clamor of Being itself. 2 Yet as long as the imagination maintains as its central point the body of the Beloved, this horror, or at least its portrayal, remains somewhat muted, covered, as it were, by the erotic.

Yet it cannot always remain so. Some people are impelled to move beyond love. They are driven to encounter all that they can of whatever is directly knowable in our condition, seeking something beyond pleasure, something beyond even joy. Yet this searching requires extreme measures, a reaching out beyond the boundaries of ordinary experience. There is a flight elsewhere. Yet the places sought and the experiences found are often not pleasant; they are trials and rites of passage. One might think of Artaud in his voyage to Mexico or of Henri Michaux in his various travels or indeed in his drug experiments. 3

In the reports of their experiences we find representations of mute and terrible privation, of the loss of reason itself and with it the loss of words. We find this torment of reason and of language in Lamantia as well. In the style, in particular, of some of his work, we observe a language quite different from what we saw in the erotic poetry. There it had verged upon non-sense, or perhaps on an excess of meaning, and yet it was buoyant and fluent nevertheless, a voluble and ecstatic speech. Yet in this later phase, as likewise in Artaud, we find a halting and aphasic idiom marked and abraded by a too-harsh contact with the evil of the world itself. 4 To speak this way is to speak in gnostic terms. In such a vision, the poetry's key element, which had previously been light or perhaps water, becomes darkness. The style grows denser still and at times becomes almost opaque, encumbered with the medium of words themselves, which are now signs of confusion. Certainly, the erotic work had possessed its own darkness, yet it was ecstatic as well, sensuous and bold, and though it was ornamented, it was yet in a certain sense forthcoming, approaching the reader with an attempt at seduction. *I will astonish you*, it sometimes seemed to say. Now the style is recessive and harsh, a charred remnant, and

crossed with waves of negative affect which disrupt syntax, rhythm, and stylistic register. The inscription of a sentence no longer follows from the natural impulse of desire toward its object, however much diverted with baroque hesitations and redundancies; rather, the unit of utterance is as much the phrase as the sentence; expression falters and continually reorients itself toward an object, Being, which it can approach only reluctantly, or from which it shrinks in an attempt to create an alternative condition, which yet it cannot imagine or have access to through any of the objects of the world. There is in fact, and quite naturally, a sort of hostility toward objects, as likewise toward nature as a whole, and images sometimes seem chosen for their grotesque inappropriateness, or even to be chosen at random.

The infinite recombination of signs, which had been the mark of creativity in the erotic mode, continues here, yet now it indicates emptiness rather than abundance. Levinas, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is a visionary of this state, this seething and hellish fecundity, in which there yet is nothing. And Artaud is its most intransigent poet. In Lamantia, however, we find a powerful, if unruly, contemporary rendering.

> That the total hatred wants to annihilate me!
> it's the sickness of american pus against which I'm hallucinated
> I'm sick of language...
>
> It's possible to live from elementals! Hell stamps out
> Vegetable spirits, zombies attack heaven! the marvelous put
> Down by martial law, America fucked by a stick of marijuana
> Paper money larded for frying corpses!
> Here comes the Gorgon! There's the outhouse!
>
> Come up from dead things, anus of the sun!
>
> *
>
> many times my song went downstairs, people of entire hate and I
> burned you in my basements without tearing my face up
> O people I hate the most! Glass automobiles snake by to decay

decay is living anthill...

*

Immense blank void, melting structures, sperm steel, the last
roasted cock, geometry of inert horizontal planes, phases of
toxicomic monsters I open the door of the air!

Certainly we see here a mood of intense aversion. And yet we might go further and regard it as more than a mood but rather as a settled attitude, one of fundamental dissent. It is fundamental in that it arises from the basic experience of the self and the body in the world; it is dissent in that the conditions of existence as such are thought to be radically unworthy of the human: there is a wrongness at the heart of things and indeed an injustice. This is explained in gnostic speculation by an elaborate cosmological myth. As Hans Jonas summarizes it:

> The universe, the domain of the Archons, is like a vast prison whose innermost dungeon is the earth, the scene of man's life. Around and above it the cosmic spheres are ranged like concentric enclosing shells. Most frequently there are the seven spheres of the planets surrounded by the eighth, that of the fixed stars. There was, however, a tendency to multiply the structures and make the scheme more and more extensive: Basilides counted no fewer than 365 "heavens." The religious significance of this cosmic architecture lies in the idea that everything which intervenes between here and the beyond serves to separate man from God, not merely by spatial distance but through active demonic force. Thus the vastness and multiplicity of the cosmic system express the degree to which man is removed from God.
>
> The spheres are the seats of the Archons, especially of the "Seven"…. The Archons collectively rule over the world, and each individually in his sphere is a warder of the cosmic prison. Their tyrannical world-rule is called *heimarmene,* universal Fate, a concept taken over from astrology but now tinged with the Gnostic anti-cosmic spirit. In its physical aspect this rule is the law of nature; in its psychical aspect, which includes for instance the institution and enforcement of the Mosaic Law, it aims at the enslavement of man. As guardian of his sphere, each Archon bars the passage to the souls that seek to ascend after death, in order to prevent their escape from the world and their return to God. [43]

Yet not only is this an account of existence. In addition, because of its concern with unjust *powers* and their effect on the human, and because of its radical valuing of freedom, the gnostic vision opens a space for an especially intense political critique. 5 And yet it is a political critique of a special kind, one in which not merely society but the worldly self as such and indeed its very body are seen as radically unworthy of a truly human life. We see such a radical vision in the poem in question, "Hypodermic Light" which, though forbidding at first glance, becomes with familiarity one of Lamantia's richest texts.

Certainly there is something startling and, indeed theatrical, about the passages quoted above. We recognize this as in part the theatrics of the American jeremiad, in which the failure of American society to become a City on a Hill provides the occasion for a fierce and public expostulation. Yet we notice as well some of the earthy irreverence of Benjamin Peret, to say nothing of the sheer fury of Artaud and his more-than-expressionistic distortions of language. There is from the first an inflecting of the gnostic away from a purely religious vision and toward the inclusion of social and political content. In addition, the writing itself is by turns Romantic and visionary, irreverent and playful, as well as furiously disjunctive. It exhibits as much restless inconsistency of style as we often find in Ginsberg and a similar heteroglossia, a seemingly indiscriminate gathering of language from disparate areas of the social world with a disregard for tonal consistency:

My cock scratches the interior lint of fire, uncreated hair is the net
Thru which vaginal/anal spiders feel out corners of the universe –
O cunt of bombs! True furniture for the creator's habitforming drugs.

["U.S.S. San Francisco"]

I've come to the time abstract paintings tear up the towns.
Laredos of benzedrine! Denvers of heroin! Gabagava and the rest
Of doomed bones of starshit. The phantom is heir to the sphinx.
Boxes of broken motorcycles jumble in slivers of blood.
Professors of economic war dovetail into their books.

["The Apocalyptic"]

This heteroglossia itself inscribes the social, through its linguistic traces, directly into the texture of the writing, which thus becomes a kind of social *exemplum* as well as a visionary document. 6 Certainly this combination of political disgust and fundamental dissent distorts poetic expression, making it almost a sequence of expletives and curses. A convulsive poetic becomes the vehicle for *a laying bare*, in which the unacknowledged truths of natural, personal, and social existence are placed before the reader. Even less than in the previous erotic work can such poems be judged in terms of the formalist aesthetics which dominated American poetry at the time of the Beat movement; and they are in this sense as revolutionary in form and expression as the work of Ginsberg, who certainly learned from them. Yet they are equally out of step with later and with current practice, and in this regard it is a singular vehemence and aggressiveness which sets them apart. The lines often have something of the character of assaults, and yet also of confidences. Here, for instance, the immediacy of address and the extremity of the speaker's state prompt curiosity; we are made to draw near, yet at the same time we are pushed away by what are either effusions of spleen or mere expletives, fragmented and

inarticulate. There is a rising to the heights of Wrath, followed by abjection before the hated fact. Yet in the midst of all this there are moments of strange beauty, perhaps of a playful and disorienting kind, very much in the manner of first-generation Surrealism, and yet also reminiscent of Frank O'Hara in their weightless and self-amused phantasmagoria. Thus, the beautiful Lul -- whose name means nothing and yet suggests so many things -- suddenly appears as though out of a dream, with her fog of peacocks and swans in her face. Yet it is only a momentary relief -- a lull -- and almost at once the poem shifts back to its ground note of pain and alienation.

> No one completes a sentence I am in hell to complete it
> Above the cobalt bomb magic fog crawls in the hideous park of addicts
> I buy ectoplasmic peanut butter
> Roaming streets empty of opium bridges open only to the south
> Everyone has left
> My compass points to the fifth direction in space your typewriter eyes
> The beautiful Lul in a fog of peacocks
> The beautiful Lul with swans in her face
> The beautiful Lul turned into a vapor
> Her breasts vapor
> Her fingers vapor
> Her breasts vapor the beautiful Lul with lips
> The beautiful lips of Lul phantom of the beautiful Lul

> They shot me full of holes at Kohlema's hut!
> It's you who'll be butchered in my precise imagination
> It'll be hard to withstand the reasoning of peyotl Rack
> Many times my song went downstairs, people of entire hate and I
> Burned you in basements without tearing my face up
> O people I hate the most! Glass automobiles snake by to decay....

> O beautiful people of hate! Your money fenders how creamy! Your electric eyes stinking! Your geometric reconstructions against my
> Destructions!

The earlier erotic poetry had been characterized by gestures of appeal and attempted possession. There was also a loss of self-possession, which yet was itself celebrated and ridden, as a wave is ridden. In this darker phase, however, the speaker toils as though entangled in his situation, limited it would seem, and indeed paralyzed, by the turbulence which streams through him. There is, naturally, an inhabiting of language, and a manipulating of it, a gesturing with it. There is also an urgency in this process which makes us aware that language is nothing less than the passage to the Other. Yet at the same time there is also a pollution of this very language by the ugliness the poet reacts against. We see in the passage quoted that the speaker is portrayed as existing in relation to others, for he addresses them if only by implication, and there is even a certain oratorical quality in the writing. Yet there also seems to be an implicit rejection of such sociality, and, in an attempt to see beyond it, a rejection of these others as fundamentally corrupt, fallen themselves, and unworthy. None of the passages quoted is in any way nice, and they all reject the famous dictum of Genet about the need for a politeness to the reader, just as Artaud himself would have. Likewise, though there are many physical details, the speaker seems uncomfortable in the body and in the physical world, and the writing is presided over by what would be *a flight elsewhere,* which yet has been arrested, trapped in its own impossibility. Behind the heteroglossic tendencies there is a radical frustration with any language, with language as such, and yet not in the manner of skeptical philosophies; rather this frustration, and the frantic rifling through idioms that we see, indicates a deep unease in the speaker's very being, a rending and a division of the speaker from himself. The poem, though it certainly seems like a very personal document at one level, employs such a diversified idiom that it suggests an entire array of

social contexts, though none is actually presented; nevertheless we hear, as though through a blur of language itself, the drift of verbal signs through a social space in the form of argot and advertising, profanity and popular idioms. For this reason, we do not feel totally confined within a specific subjectivity. The work's convulsiveness seems not at all a private experience but rather to occur in a kind of *theatrum.* We recall that one of the characteristics of the Christian hell is *cacophony.* Yet the reason for this is the loss of the real and the leveling of everything to mere signs, which are then by definition false. Cacophony is the torrential outpouring of these empty signs in a theatre, where they echo and re-echo. In this way, the poet's expression, though it is an attack upon the false signs of society, is yet itself filled with their very falsity, which it seems to writhe against in order to counter; or perhaps one might better say that it allows this falsity to exhibit itself by providing it with a space in which it can be heard, augmented and augmented further, as though in an echo chamber or a cavern.

SURREALISM AS UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITY

Yet it must be acknowledged that what is being represented by means of these infernal metaphors is *this* social existence under capitalism, and *this* language of the Pax Americana, which now are both gleefully uncovered as the repellent and tormenting conditions of existence: as he says in one poem, "Decay is living anthill." The word "decay" is telling. Existence swarms, not merely with other people but with its own molecular fecundity, with the power of time to multiply existents infinitely, with the

inexhaustible self-presentation of the *il y a*, which seems matched, in oneself, by an equally inexhaustible capacity to recognize, albeit in horror. In the state of insomnia, Levinas tells us, we are subject to an unending vigilance at the heart of being. 7 In "Hypodermic Light" the surrealist dream, which is transport, is held captive to a place, and to a hated one; the surrealist moment of recognition is marred by turmoil and converted into an affliction, which is the ground note of insomnia. Certainly there is no rest; rather objects pester one like insects. The evil of the world, which capitalism has multiplied and decorated, consists in this very fecundity. (There are new models of cars every year.) This evil must now be called forth before itself, and us, in a series of denunciations. There is a certain paranoia implicit in this, and yet a vigor as well, a vigor of *rejection.* It is quite simply the rejection of the society of consumption in terms as insulting to it as possible. For the frenetic activity of this society, which we usually call "consumerism," seems to be the perfect embodiment of the false, the wasteful, and the decadent.

Yet in order to appreciate the complexity of this indictment, we should look at the poem from the beginning.

HYPODERMIC LIGHT

It's absurd I can't bring my soul to the eye of odoriferous fire
My soul whose teeth never leave their cadavers
My soul twisted on rocks of mental freeways
My soul that hates music
I would rather not see the Rose in my thoughts take on illusionary prerogatives
It is enough to have eaten bourgeois testicles
It is enough that the masses are all sodomites
Good Morning
The ships are in I've brought the gold to burn Moctezuma

I'm in a tipi joking with seers I'm smoking yahnah
I'm in a joint smoking marijuana with a cat who looks like Jesus Christ
Heroin is a door always opened by white women
My first act of treason was to be born!
I'm at war with the Zodiac
My suffering comes on as a fire going out O beautiful world contemplation!

It's a fact my soul is smoking!

*

That the total hatred wants to annihilate me!
It's the sickness of american pus against which I'm halucinated
I'm sick of language
I want this wall I see under my eyes break up and shatter you
I'm talking all the poems after God
I want the table of visions to send me oriole opium
A state of siege
It's possible to live directly from elementals! Hell stamps out vegetable
 Spirits, zombies attack heaven! the marvelous put down by
 Martial law, America fucked by a stick of marijuana
Paper money larded for frying corpses!

HERE comes the Gorgon! THERE'S the outhouse!

 Come up from dead things, anus of the sun!

Interestingly, the initial section deals as much with the poet's sense of incapacity as with any external factors, whether in nature or in society. These initial moments of negativity are internal, and his dissatisfaction is directed toward himself at first. We often find this pattern in mystical literature, where a confession of unworthiness will set the scene for the mystical experience. Likewise here in the first line, we have a confession of inability and of lack. A soul whose teeth never leave their cadavers is mired in the past in some way or other; similarly, to be twisted on rocks of mental freeways is to have internalized the regime of the North American state with its rigorously organized infrastructures which here serve as a metaphor for an equally disciplined and supervised

mental life. (One might recall the author's adolescent expulsion from junior high school for "mental delinquency"). Now there is little room left for any departures from the fixed, the planned, and the foreseen. The ecstatic conditions of fire and of music are barred to him. In fact, he is so much aware of this that he would rather not know of these possibilities which yet are still somehow present, latent in his own imagination and emotions. These he characterizes as the Rose in his own thoughts, borrowing an emblem of mystical *ekstasis* from the medieval tradition. In his current state, however, these glimpses of refining and revivifying fire seem illusory. The mental freeways are "rocks of mental freeways," and rocks are a traditional symbol of barrenness and sterility, likewise of cataclysmic break up, or mere failure: hopes are dashed upon rocks, just as ships are (and failed marriages). In the passage as a whole there is a sense of both the violence of cataclysm and the melancholy of failure. Yet the speaker's condition is not his alone; it is fostered and reinforced by the society he lives in, whose obtuseness and greed he continually denounces. In fact, he has been invaded by these negative forces from the first, and this possession by the social imaginary takes the form of paralysis, an inability to reach beyond himself toward a more creative and energetic condition.

Surely these denunciations which he is yet able to make are justified. Does anyone like freeways, mental or otherwise? And yet in some of these prophetic utterances there may be an element of what we might call elitism, for want of a better word, and a bitterness which contorts the poetry and darkens the tone to a degree which will make some readers resistant. This bitterness and this anger sometimes take the peculiar form of sexual disgust, or, to be more precise, a disgust with the sexuality of the populace, the *demos*. Certainly Lamantia is part of the permanent Left where it shades off into

revolutionary gnosis (to borrow of phrase from Ernst Bloch) 8 and an anarchism of a more or less Shelleyan or Blakean variety, one which promises a visionary triumph over its own dire context.

> Destroyed works walk out of walls into me into the poem saying it is
> an ogre's hand rocks my living tables it is a vast cloth
> of cotton folds my body it is heart of sleep I live Visage
> in atomic night of dark triumph where walls of the poem are
> fixed in fire at the flying dragon's emanation thruout space.
>
> Within me is the power to BE! TO LIVE! The dead are dead and the
> living -- live!
>
> ["Fin del Mundo"]

Yet in his work there sometimes rises up, very powerfully, and with the force of a visceral revulsion, the feeling that "the people to come" are certainly not *these* people, these Americans, with their all-too-evident desires and libidinal restlessness. We might recall the spectacle which William Carlos Williams celebrates in his excursion to the park on Sunday in *Patterson*. 9 Williams' reaction to the vulgarity and candid sexuality of the sunbathers is appreciative, even admiring. Yet Lamantia has an opposite response. In this he would be joined by Artaud himself, whose intense discomfort with sexuality has to do with the *assent* it imposes on the human subject during moments of passion and *jouissance*, an assent which runs violently counter to his gnostic quest for freedom: thus his impassioned letters to friends in which he urges celibacy on them, and the tormented denunciations of physiology which we find in his late writings. Certainly Lamantia shares some of these tendencies. It is partly for this reason, that he views the masses as sodomites, for they revel in the fact of the body in a way which is as offensive to true a gnostic as the residents of Sodom's reveling was (presumably) to Jehovah himself; and

yet it is also partly because they have all been fucked in the ass, so to speak, by the political regime under which they live, though, curiously, they seem not to realize this. Their expressed sexuality thus represents the libidinal persistence of the body itself, and this alone makes it threatening to a true gnostic who seeks an elsewhere outside of the cycles of mere generation, in the ecstatic conditions of fire and of music; yet it also indicates the sheer self-absorption of a willfully ignorant populace and their political blindness, a blindness which, given the extremity of the situation -- references to nuclear weapons are frequent in this particular volume, *Destroyed Works* -- becomes actually criminal. In their myopic enjoyments they do not see what the speaker sees, and since the regime of consumer capitalism manipulates their desires into an ongoing state of frivolous distraction, they seem ever less likely to be able to. We must place this physical revulsion, therefore, in a political context, for part of its psychological motivation does actually come from that: the dehumanizing order of nature and the dehumanized order of the leviathan state must both be denounced. Their dual rejection includes also a rejection of these others, one's fellows, since they are exemplary of both realms, the state of nature and the nation state. This type of response -- revulsion at the body of the *demos* -- is familiar from the poetry of T.S. Eliot, though Eliot's political orientation was opposite to that of Lamantia. Ginsberg, in contrast to both, seems more accepting of the natural world itself and of the people just as they are in their unreconstructed vulgarity, though he is equally critical of the post-war American regime.

Thus in certain lines the tone becomes especially exasperated. This does not lessen its prophetic intent, though it heightens still further its grotesque mode. Yet it is a special achievement of surrealism in general to assimilate the prophetic to a grotesque

phantasmagoria, and Ginsberg himself adopts this to great effect in some of his own poetry, especially in "Howl." Now to have eaten the testicles of the bourgeoisie is certainly a grotesque fate. One feels that it must be similar to having one's soul eat, or at least chew on, cadavers, though where this initial image was an expression of self-criticism, this later one heightens the disgust and projects it outward toward the social context. The poem, unlike much American literature, even of a radical and politically committed kind, aims at a specific *class*, as opposed to a social condition in general. The bourgeoisie, like the freeways, are a proliferating entity. They would like to take up all available social space. In pursuit of their freedoms, they create a manifold and ubiquitous pressure to which the poem itself is a response. It is perhaps an insufficient one, and it is aware of itself as such. Yet what response would be enough? And yet the concluding lines of the section, seem motivated by an acute sense of this insufficiency. The poet feels a certain inadequacy, not only in his capacity as poet, but even in the fact of living where he does. The lines "I'm at war with the zodiac/ my first act of treason was to be born..." have a deliberate and self-mocking exaggeration, yet there is a real suffering in his situation, which mounts as his ability to see, criticize, and denounce is overwhelmed by the magnitude of what it confronts. As a result, he sinks into a state of what we might call frustrated prophecy.

This mood of violent frustration continues in the next section, and likewise the equally violent dissent against the regime under which he lives. In fact in its tone and movement the passage as a whole is a powerful mimesis of raving or delirium. In a way, the poet tells us this himself ("I'm hallucinated..."). Yet this hallucination must take the form of an actual *undergoing*, a concrete experiencing, and not merely a naming or a

describing. He does not present any specific hallucinations or visions, but rather the general state of delirium out of which they would arise. In so doing, his language is disrupted by a special anger and by confusion raised to a visionary power, yet these should be understood not as mere states of mind but as exempla of the diffused social mentality of a time and a place which blur together with elements of a more personal expression to create a deliberate confusion, a kind of framed static, of multiple voices. Deleuze and Guattari point out that delirium is political and historical in its content. 10 Do we not see this here? The poet's language is no longer an expression of his own condition merely. It is a site where historical and social forces cross and into which they irrupt, giving evidence of their violence and their pathology, which appear only at first to be those of the writer. While this subjective aspect is not excluded (and in fact the poem starts with it), it seems to me that as the writing proceeds it becomes less a personal outpouring and more a kind of demonstration in which the poet makes of his language an empty space into which a distempered social imaginary can enter. What allows this to happen is an absence of communicational ambition. That is to say, the writing has lost all interest in depicting either a state of affairs or a single and singular impression. Instead it is a blurred palimpsest of signs, although a furiously animated one. Perhaps it reminds one, too, of those moments in film when a soundtrack is flooded with the undifferentiated noise and babble of a given social world. Garbled voices, ambient noise, and static become signs of the pressing reality of things (and of the authenticity of the artist's vision). Here, language becomes an opening toward pure intensive states of expression and affect which are not confined to any individual subjectivity, however much there may always be a strong and particular speaking voice in the writing. Yet it is the schizoid

breakup of this voice which creates holes, gaps, and fissures through which social existence itself is made manifest, not merely in the form of its scattered linguistic traces but also in its underlying spiritual nature. We see, in fact, an irruption of the social and the historical into the space of writing as they mark themselves upon it in the form of a pure violence. We also witness an attempt at resistance, though the self which must resist is fragmented, scattered like the limbs of the Egyptian god Osiris who is in fact mentioned at the end of the third section.

In characterizing the poem as a whole, one might easily use the metaphor of nightmare. The natural light of reason is put out. The absence of this light is the poem's seething darkness. Yet there is a further absence too, that of nature. Certainly there are numerous images derived from the natural world, as there are in almost any poetry. And yet the style in its disjunctions and in its harshness sets itself so much against a mimesis of the visible that one has to feel a pointed rejection here. This is perfectly in keeping with what we see as its gnostic intention, its movement toward a freedom outside the context of nature, of *physis*, and therefore outside of the relational and the responsive as such, which always characterize that context.

If rejection of the object -- society, the Other, nature -- becomes intense enough, what is the result? One result certainly is a disintegration of language. We see this here in the fragmentation of syntax as well as in what appears to be a harried reaching after image and metaphor, each one of them placing the speaker in a particular relationship to his subject, which is simply the totality of his experience in the United States in the 1950s. In the passage above, he is bringing gold to burn Montezuma, 11 adopting what would appear to be a role of guilt or complicity in conquest and colonization. But in the

next moment, he is in a tipi participating in a ritual of smoking, thus taking on the role of fellow victim and perhaps even conspirator against the colonizing power. To conspire does in fact mean to breathe together, and so such a ritual is an especially apt image for a summoning of the communal spiritual powers with which to resist colonization. This image of smoking then provides, in the very next line, an immediate passageway (as though by a subterranean route in history) to a quite different fellowship, an alternative community, perhaps also in its own way conspiratorial and oppositional, the bohemian underground. In keeping with this identification, the argot of the beatnik momentarily invades the poem. This hectic metamorphosis continues in the next section. The speaker's shifting attitude seems located less in the images than in the verbs, which express not actions but fundamental dispositions: *I'm hallucinated, I'm sick, I want, I'm taking, I want....* The speaker perceives himself as diminished and fragmented and seems indeed under a state of siege (the entirety of the seventh line). There is a sudden change, however, in fact almost a revelation. "It's possible to live directly from elementals!" The very first two words strike a contrasting note in the context of a rhetoric till this moment dominated by the negative. Suddenly there is a *yes*. It is a glimmering yes, not entirely present; it is held out by the future to which it points. And yet is it really possible to live from the elemental? We recall that in Levinas it is exactly this ability which marks human beings as natural creatures, achieving their life and its proper fulfillment only in a natural and productive emplacement in the physical world. One lives from air and light, from water and the natural products of the earth, and one's life is drawn from those elemental sources. 12 It is a vision which Wallace Stevens, for example, would have endorsed. Yet here, in this darkness, this possibility is merely that, something glimpsed,

but out of reach. Perhaps the idea is even entertained with an intense irony, and the line should be viewed as sarcasm directed at the speaker's own desires, which he now feels must remain always frustrated. It is not really possible to live from elementals after all; in fact it is scarcely possible *to live* at all. The world into which one has been thrown (a motif found not only in Heidegger but also in gnostic speculation) is radically inhospitable, both in its natural conditions and in its political ordering. One feels pressed from all sides and as though forced up against a limit. We see this clearly, and hear it loudly, in the remainder of the verset. It is as if a trap door had been opened, seeming to promise escape, only then to reveal a writhing mass of worms. For paper money is in fact the fuel used for consuming and disposing of corpses in the political regime in question -- the corpses of minorities, of the poor, of the citizens of the third world. Both the natural world and the extant political order are realms of cruelty, grossness, and stupidity to which the soul in its quest for its own proper realm (light) and state (fire) recognizes itself as alien. It is an extreme vision, expressed in extreme language, and not all will be able to appreciate the expression or endorse the meaning. And yet it must strike a resonant note with at least some, and perhaps with most at some time. Has not everyone had the experience of looking out upon the world and thinking "No, not this." At those moments the world is indeed the realm of dead things, and the sun appears, appropriately, as Bataille's solar anus: "Come up from dead things, anus of the sun!"

The next section, the third, opens with a momentary shift into a greater realism.

old after midnight spasm
juke box waits for junk
round about midnight music
combing bop hair

getting ready to cook
Jupiter wails!
Heroin of visionary wakeup in flight of Bird and The Going Forth By Day

The pipe's spiritual brain winters off the Nile old hypodermic needle
under foot of Anubis
Mother Death
I'm at the boat of Ra Set
I'm Osiris hunting stars his black tail of the sun !
It's the end of melancholy sad bop midnights.

The speaker, a heroin addict, is waiting for his fix. The setting is not specific but is one of bohemian night-life generally. The language has become quiet, as though taking note, recording impressions in a telegraphic syntax; it is the language of notation, which is given a certain low-keyed expressiveness by a discreet imitation of jazz rhythms. The lines tend to have four stresses, like the dominant 4/4 meter of most jazz. Yet the pattern is uneven and shifts quietly, leaving certain spaces blank, as though open to silence. At a certain point there is a winding down, or perhaps a disintegration. Yet this process is interrupted, and there is a complete change of rhythm at line seven, which exhibits a running, trimetrical fluency. The cause of this change is perhaps a combination of drugs and music; the drug takes effect, the soloist takes off.

And yet no moment of transport can last, at least none taking place in this context, neither this approach to the condition of music brought about by jazz and heroin nor the more tranquil visitation of the beautiful Lul, which occurs two sections later. As though to illustrate this with a vengeance, the forces of mere generation come flooding back into the poem in the remaining sections. It is like a break up or a ship wreck in which the speaker's vision of freedom and transcendence, until then narrowly maintained against the adversities imposed by the world itself and by the state, is nearly destroyed.

Immense blank void, melting structures, sperm steel, the last roasted
cock, geometry of inert horizontal planes, phases of toxicomic
monsters I open the door of the air!

My cock scratches the interior lint of fire, uncreated hair is the net
thru which vaginal/anal spiders feel out corners of the universe –
O cunt of bombs! true furniture for the Creature's habitforming drugs.

An old man in a temple

shucking corn.

The Antiquities come out thru the curtain of Fuck, they have reopened
the holes of my arms
I keep chewing the leg of civilizations, at the origin of incest
Morphine is equivalent to the apotheosis of cannibal motherhood
Christ is a rocket ship

Every time I smoke a cigarette the creator has blinked all stars time
pebbles of water in a trillion second of man's sodomite existence
my words can not lie!

It isn't a question of love it's how you find out and that, as the Master said,
brings on anguish

"He who has known the world has found the body and he who has found
the body has known a corpse"

Here the speaker's state as a drug addict serves as a metaphor for the cosmos itself. He has undergone a catastrophic diminishment and now exists as a shrunken remnant of himself; likewise the universe as a whole is a shrunken form, inadequate to the amplitude of his desire, which remains active within him. Thus, in a kind of parody of religious expression (in which so often the created world is praised and hymned) the eons of generation are dismissively characterized as "the antiquities come out through the curtain

of Fuck" the last phrase serving as a kind of demotic stand-in for the Hindu idea of the veil of Maya.

So much for poetic prosodic bullshit
Images crawl under this slice of windowpane
Monkeys are caught in yr eyes

Simultaneous reality falls downstairs in a wheelchair
Simultaneous reality I step on yr blue poppy head
Jeanlu is off in the forest combing sheep of hair
T is for mouth W for mandrake Ten is not a number
I fix the Vision by a snap of my cat's tail
You see the world you see it not/ going into the distances of the spirit
It is Sky, ancient heaven, microcosmos, that this poem breaks to
I look at smoke like a pillar of God
I go searching spirits of wood
Morgenroth fumbles the locks of dream eyes open Morgenroth
Morgenroth urinated on fields of Marijuana eyes Morgenroth
Spilled on swords of history Morgenroth I carve yr face by starspilled mariahs
Morenroth who has made world upside down / tilted the earth again
Morgenroth shadow in the phantom's tail/ maker of smokeballs/ volcano eater!
Morgenroth is the reason reason has no reason for being
Morgenroth is soup thrown over the garden wall
Morgenroth is bombed out rotting baby chair MY MARVELOUS KITE OF MORGENROTH!

This last section is ironically tilted *This World's Beauty*. The violent tone continues as the poet turns against his own creation "so much for prosodic bullshit". His state as isolated consciousness looking out upon the world is summed up neatly in the next line: "images crawl under this slice of windowpane." Yet the images the world provides are all negative ones, rejected by the seer -- now a rather veiled and occulted seer -- as inadequate and flawed, and this in what is perhaps one of the most intensely gnostic passages in all American literature. There is certainly a questing for a transcendent revelation and yet at the same time not merely failure but satire directed

against the quest and the quester, who himself knows his search to be futile:"You see the world you see it not/ going into the distances of the spirit/ it is a pillar of God…."

His cat's tail is in fact his own poetic imagination which in its manifold turning and troping is actually a principle of deception and falsehood, just as the world seems to be nothing but a field of teeming falsehoods, frauds, tricks and cruel jokes. This perception is exacerbated by the capitalist context, with its advertising, its hucksterism, and its vulgar and illiterate populace. Finally in a tone of ultimate rejection, the sun -- clearly Batailles solar anus, as we have already said -- is reduced to the satirical epithet "morgenroth" a mere kite presiding over the empty universe: "Morgenroth is the reason reason has no reason for being....MY MARVELOUS KITE OF MORGENROTH!" The vision is one of uncompromising dissent, and yet as we have seen repeatedly, the numerous references to social life in the United States in the 50's, the oblique evocation of the bohemian sub-culture, and the continuously heteroglossic nature of the idiom form an implicit social indictment as well as a visionary and religious one.

II

A VIOLENCE WITHIN TO RESIST THE VIOLENCE FROM WITHOUT

Despite the evident fury in the poems just looked at, the persona who speaks in them is held captive to the states he undergoes and is acted upon rather than acting. Of course, this is characteristic of much of the literature of mysticism and certainly it is also seen in the literature of drug experimentation. The protagonist of Carlos Castaneda's narratives, as likewise of Michaux' more descriptive accounts, is always helpless before the hallucinations he endures (or can just barely endure). One recalls the note in *Grands Epreuves de L'Esprit* made during one of Michaux's mescaline sessions which consists of the single word *insupportable* written over and over. Such abjection and passivity may be necessary in various sorts of mystical and religious experiences, insuring a greater openness and receptivity. And we do find in "Vacuous Suburbs" a pronounced calm and acceptance. The lines in their euphonious grace enact a stillness and poise, and it is easy to lose sight of how lovely some of them actually are, with their echoes of scripture, their subtle anapestic and iambic pulse and fluent vowel music:

> Someone some one else some vortex of meeting final crystal open crystal
> Beautiful crystal
> nothing else matters
> I'm falling from high places
> It's so beautiful there are no images anymore
> there IS a presence there IS a light there IS

this incomprehensible transparent land
sudden/complete

*

Constant flight in the air of the Holy Ghost
I long for the luminous darkness of God
I long for the superessential light of this darkness
Another darkness I long for the end of longing
I long for the
it is Nameless what I long for
a spoken word caught in its own meat saying nothing
This nothing ravishes beyond ravishing

["Vacuous Suburbs"]

Such writing marks an opening and an abnegation, and yet at the same time it marks a limit. Though it might express a necessary stage in a spiritual journey, it also brings about the end of poetic expression, for a stilled soul would also be a silent one. The renewal of this expression can only come with the renewal of the energies of the subject, the embodied self who must suffer violence, in this case the violence of the sacred. Yet though it must open itself to this violence in a total exposure, at some point it must summon the means to resist. The wound of the sacred experience, as also that of infernal dissent, must close and the selfhood become annealed in its inherent conatus and resistance. Wallace Stevens is certainly an incongruous poet to invoke here, and yet his epigram expresses the power of resistance we find smoldering beneath the darkness in "Hypodermic Light." Yet here in "Vacuous Suburbs" it seems nearly stilled. What accounts for this change? The title itself is a clue. In the word *vacuous* we find the idea of breath, yet also that of emptiness. The emptiness of the mystical state is necessary for its

peculiar inspiration and its peculiar and self-denying content. It is not a state to live in permanently. It is a suburb, a special region, and not a central one but rather peripheral. It is a question, therefore, of what can replace it. If one has come to this point, this impasse of the negative, how can one get out of it?

JEANLU

By the window cut in half Jeanlu
Jeanlu in the opulent night her breast riding the sky
Jeanlu asleep like a nautilus smiling at Victor Hugo
Jeanlu bared on the branches coming from my third eye
Jeanlu if it is a candle of fire women blue in the night Jeanlu!
Where the borders break the caskets of lovers – MASK! – Jeanlu
In spite of icicles fed by flamingoes Jeanlu
whenever wandering fauns drown and are reborn Jeanlu
going down in a dream of descending demolitions Jeanlu
waiting! waiting! As sponges of the sea in love Jeanlu
The earth is emptying Jeanlu
soon spansules of eternity
explode you Jeanlu
Jeanlu who is
seer/sperm.

This is Lamantia's equivalent of Hart Crane's rapt Caribbean vision, which was itself tormented by its own gnostic hells: the "tarantula rattling at the lily's foot," which yet (or therefore) led to an image of primal return: "seer of the sun exploded in the sea." 13 Here in the darkness, another uninterpretable name -- a successor to Lul, Jeanlu -- beckons us out of the negative vision into which we have descended. And yet this enigmatic female form -- not a form actually but a fleeting presence, and really just a name -- leads only to a similar fusion with the maternal darkness. It does not really offer a path outward, or at

least not one that can be followed. Likewise, in other poems there is a movement toward a more benign and exalted visionary intensity.

> The purity of the dream-rivulet crosses the depth of
> day
> permanent witness from the source of things
> draped: a forest of fiery signs
>
> ["The Curtain of Magic Turns Over Motors of Sleep"]

This is from a later piece written in honor of the World Surrealist Exhibition in Chicago in 1976. In this beautiful, limpid writing the transcendent is imagined in terms of an absolute purity and clarity and fused with the image of the pristine depths of the day. Here we see the surrealist vision at its more Neo-Platonic end, where the effort to see beyond the ordinary encounters the welcoming transparency of light. Though the transcendent may be obscured by our day to day preoccupations, it is still accessible. Thus, in the line, the word "draped" itself is hidden only just past the line break. Proceed only a bit further, the line seems to say, and you will cross the threshold past which there wait the fiery signs of the ultimately real. The threshold is the limit of our ordinary perception. The fiery signs drape the source of things and thus hide it, yet by this very hiding they also reveal its presence. The vision and even to some extent the style are certainly familiar from Baudelaire's famous sonnet. 14 Lamantia's lines could almost be seen as a slightly jagged, slightly jazzy modernist rewrite. In Mexico, however, he receives a different vision, one whose vehicle is not the light itself nor the clarity and vibrant emptiness of space but the substance of the earth -- dust -- and of organic life, and

in fact the jungle; not the explicit imperium of day but the occult powers and latent encroachments of the night.

FROM THE FRONT

Tenochtitlan!
Grey seven thousand feet high
Mist of dust – tin door open
To slow motion immobilized traffic
-- girl at window --- terrace—
terrace a heartmobile---
wind! Dust of wind --- wind!

Sail of dead ghost opium people
Fantast --- the fields of Egluria

These watches promote me
Venetian blinds, Chicagos of Zeno

The mountain errupts
Landmasses grab the Pacific
Earthquakes
The sky is peeling its skin off!

Vision has moved past the swarming emptiness of the *il y a* and past the infernal theatre of gnostic isolation. We re-emerge into the realm of nature and re-encounter the actual world. Yet the landscape itself appears as a strange palimpsest: nature and history are fused as though in a kind of rebus and both are reduced to certain essential forms presented in acts of bare nomination only slightly modified by descriptive detail or coloring; naming and description intermingle and interrupt each other. We are given rather the *incipits* of description and a disjointed and uncertain naming, as though through

an aphasia. Thus, both functions are simplified: description is primitive and historical memory, the realm of proper names specifically, likewise is. There is merely the mountain, the doorway, the window, the city which is any, whether Chicago or some other, the aboriginal ghosts, the lonely room of the isolated seer, dimmed by blinds that happen to be called "venetian," a word which, in a movement exemplifying the poem's hidden economy -- this shifting between name and description -- becomes the deep blue -- venetian blue -- of dusk and of early morning. The forms in question inhabit a stark mountainside, somehow also a kind of ruin which, in the night or in the early morning, takes on the outlines of a visionary theatre where the ghosts of the past and the thwarted political hopes of the present blur together.

> Is this American mood? 1960 weather beasts,
> Who tampers the moon tides?
>
> Reprieve. Sail of dust wind
> Venetian mountain sequence
> Zeroguns silence the street
> Mute traffics --- desperate surrealism
> Backfire from motorcycles
> Waves over empty roof tops
>
> Geneva of movies, who ate the dogbrick sandwich?
> I've cut a loaf of it
> And spattered eiou --- chaos
> Slamming venetian blinds
> Click, the cat asleep
> Aloha, tidal waves
>
> Where am I? You answer
> The question where am I?
> Who's here? Who wants Veracruz?
> What is New York? Who is San Francisco?
> Friend
> Where are you?
> What to do go where how?

Motorcycles of atonal venetian blind dust of wind roof top!

Here we see landscape inflected by, combined with words, or, to be more accurate, with scattered verbal material. These fragments of utterances occur in the poet's mind even as he beholds the strange primeval world into which he has ventured. It is not possible, after all, to leave behind the society he has attempted to leave. The landscape is nearly obscured by the historical which here is present through its most ephemeral signs -- the words and phrases of a particular society at a particular time. This is to superimpose one hell on another, the historical on the natural. Neither the capacity to see, to understand, nor even to enjoy is truly available to the speaker. Sight, affect, and understanding seem to interrupt and to disrupt each other. An extreme parataxis condenses the impressions of the last line, almost superimposing them, fusing the social and the natural. Yet this is a moment of breakthrough in the poem which, in its very fusion of natural and social apocalypses, in its rising rhetoric and in its image of the wind bringing a sudden release of tensions, is reminiscent of moments in Eugenio Montale. 15

Yet for self and emotion, for mind and writing to reassert themselves fully -- and, in a sense, for writing itself to do so -- writing as a specific power -- the special quietude he enjoys up in the region of mystical emptiness must be left behind, as likewise must the rising and sunlit expanse of the neo-platonic vision, despite its exultation and its certitude. Neither can give sufficient impetus to the signal nature of this poet's genius, which almost more than any other American writer is marked by a promethean spirit of rebellion. In both cases there is an insufficient engagement with nature, with the substance and resistance of the world and with the imagery of natural forms and objects.

Even in the case of “Hypodermic Light” there was an absence raging at the heart of the poem’s darkness that made it an evacuation of spleen. This was an absence of the natural world, of its images and its light. The power that he seeks and needs for the full expression of his genius is a power of resistance to the given which yet must be expressed in the images of the given itself, the objects of nature. In this way the embrace of the elemental furnishes a spirit of resistance and contestation with a greater imaginative animation, as well as with a more rich and varied means of expression than would be possible in the realms of superessential light, whether darkened or radiant. This reassertion of will must be combined with the reassertion of writing itself, and so we will find an exceeding of mysticism in favor of poetic expression which, though once again anarchic and violent, will be marked by a closer relation to the visible and be bathed in a more ample and generous luminosity, as opposed to the darkness visible which we have seen dominating the poet’s idiom so far in this chapter. With this we will encounter the outlines of a kind of humanism, or at least a naturalism, in which the question of how human beings can bare to live in the world will become one of the poetry’s motivating concerns. And yet, for all that, we will find no real brightening of mood.

SOLAR SLIME/FLAMING TEETH

Despite its dense and enigmatic expression, this poem is in fact another prophetic denunciation of American society. Yet before it becomes specifically political it creates a strange sunset landscape introduced by the repeated word "tonight"

> Tonight burned with solar slime tonight flung from the space station tonight purveyed by lugar vendors tonight the umbilical cord of this torrent of words.
>
> You are no more the sinister angel but the white killer dressed in carnation milk. Your 12-year old lips refuse the black dinner and the nun you raped is severely punished by the mallet of madness. I swim free. Nevertheless. Exiles. The tough nut of the night bolts the window on my dream more personal than what you think you may become or ever were. Pea brain is the star's octopus sucker or is not to be disturbed; to sleep, a poet Awakened on the shed of super-malachites and the luminous lodge *gained* is an entrance to the beard's fame.
>
> The hook of the telephones of the bed tear out your song "Cruelty annulled" O pincer of the invisible become the concrete layer of immortal conundrums.

The poet takes a position not so much in a place, but in a time. Yet it is a time which has a certain *spatial* character -- sunset. We see him against a background of the last of day, which, as the poem progresses, easily becomes a Last Day. The solar slime is, of course, the last light of the sun, the dregs of light as we might think of it. Light, therefore, is a residue. The world it illuminates is a waste, a leaving. We enter the world as though at

some point after its destruction; nature is a remnant, and the horizon appears to be a burnt-out ruin, like the sun itself. The earthly context into which we fall, "flung from the space station," is characterized by violence and by destruction. If we are flung from the space station, are we therefore visitors from elsewhere? From a place somewhere in the vicinity of the earth, oriented to it, and yet somehow at a remove? The visitor from a world beyond is a recurring gnostic motif. The poem as a whole enacts what we might think of as one of the fundamental gnostic themes, the alienation of the human soul from the world as it exists, and, with that, the idea of coming to the world as a mere visitor from elsewhere, looking at it, reflecting on it and, in this case, denouncing its inhuman conditions, themselves partly the result of human actions and human folly.

In the second stanza, the poet addresses himself. The "you" is not merely his earlier self or primarily that, it is rather the essential, the soul, or perhaps the spirit of poetic vision as such, viewed apart from its embodiment in the individual. The angel is sinister because it embodies the creative, which must depart from the given, and so is always akin to what Yeats referred to as the antithetical. Perhaps it is sinister as well because of the author's membership in the permanent Left, the eternal party of revolt. For this reason it is the white killer, the spirit of prophetic violence and dissent, possessed of the deadly honesty of vision. Yet now it is dressed in carnation milk, a deflating phrase of course, and indicative of the poem's occasional tone of satirical distance, both from its social context and from its own ambitions. Yet nonetheless one hears an echo of Trakl, for example, in "Your twelve year old lips refuse the black dinner and the nun you raped is severely punished by the mallet of madness." Of course, there is a degree of gravity in the Trakl which Lamantia does not completely aspire to. 15 He has moments of it,

perhaps, but then diverts the flow of his expression into a less consistent range of tones -- the vatic, the cutting, the self-mocking, the whimsical. This tonal inconsistency might once have seemed anarchic (though Ginsberg has it too), yet it now seems very contemporary and links Lamantia's work with a range of younger writers. 16

There is a break in the poem, and a declaration of freedom. Yet this is followed by an image of enclosure and constraint: "the tough nut...dream" is a play on the phrase nut and bolt. Bolted into the night, and into his dream, he enters the source of inspiration and of vision, the luminous lodge. Again we notice in such epithets a tone of self-mockery bordering on the acid and desperate. What has he won in achieving the beard's fame? There is a bed, we notice. The bed is equipped with telephones, actually with a number of them, and yet with only one hook. This kind of image, amusing and yet almost uninterpretable, is one of the essential surrealist characteristics. One thinks again of Dali, or perhaps of some bizarre construction by Giacometti: bed, beard, large hook accommodating many phones -- sexual metaphors scurry beneath the surface like roaches behind woodwork and convey a faint undercurrent of nausea. The quoted phrase "cruelty annulled" would appear to be grimly ironic, and the poem verges on the disgust of Artaud in its spirit of revolt not merely against a political dispensation but against the very conditions of existence itself, a spirit of intransigent rejection which is expressed in a tone of simultaneous mockery and self-mockery. Yet there is a deeper discomfort than mockery alone can convey. This is seen in the metaphysical pressure exhibited by so many of the images and figures. At this point the pincers of the invisible become the concrete layers of immortal conundrums. If we understand concrete as meaning both specific reality and also building material, we begin to see how the poem attempts to fuse

metaphysical vision with social critique. The immortal conundrums, a satirically pompous phrase by which the poet intends the problems that beset him as a human being and, beyond that, as a member of a particular society, are, among other things, layers of concrete. The ugliness and devastation of the modern urban environment is itself the manifestation of a principle of evil (without in any way being the less political for all that). It is as if Aratud's great vision of the human figure tortured by natural forms on the face of the mountain of signs should be rewritten using the concrete slabs, steel grids, and glass surfaces of modern north American cityscapes. 17

The poem moves into a more obviously political phase in the next paragraph. The rant blocks are the tenements of the east and the phony canals of California are the tracings on the landscape of western water management and agri-business. The poet's tone is quite acid by this point. He dedicates a sarcastic reference to those absurd spectacles where nuclear submarines or other impressive artifacts of the military industrial complex are sent on their way by having some official's wife break a bottle of champagne against their steel, aluminum, or titanium hull.

> ...the solemn melancholic towers of San Francisco join their armless tomatoes to the floating cisterns of Seattle which I imagine carve the totems of Columbus Ohio through a visible network of telepathic geometry *That landscape on fire.*

This single rhythmic unit of near-free association presents a kind of mock landscape. It is as if the poet wanted to convey a complex image cluster in a single-breathed gesture, a bit like dumping out a large package before someone and saying "there." It seems to indicate that we should view what it conveys as part of the root of the problem, though at first it is rather opaque, given the nature of its metaphors. Yet we notice right off that the

imagery has changed a bit. It seems more oriented toward the earthly and conveys, roughly, the idea of a landscape which has receded before the overwhelming presence of cities, which in turn communicate with each other by means which are not readily apparent. A strange economy of the unnatural is suggested in armless tomatoes moving north to Seattle's floating cisterns. The tone is one of surrealist jesting, yet the imagery borders on that of science fiction. In reality, it refers to the fact that the landscape has receded not only before the dominance of the urban but more importantly before the ramifying activities of capital whose unforeseeable manifestations can best be described in the codes of science fiction, as various theorists have suggested. Columbus Ohio could be anywhere; it is one of those cities sometimes chosen to typify the "normal," that is to say, the highly supervised mentality of the "heartland," like Peoria. To carve the totems of Columbus, Ohio is therefore to determine the imaginary of the populace as a whole, and this is done by means of telepathic geometry -- the channels and stations and grids of TV, radio, and now computer networks. The burning landscape is therefore on fire not only with the phosphorescent chemicals which produce those armless tomatoes and no doubt fill the floating cisterns of Seattle but also with electronic signals carrying the fiery forms of ideology created and disseminated by the corporate bodies of the leviathan state.

> …the mouth of black men forever sealed with heraldic signs and the snobbery of lost kingdoms found themselves New Life at the moment of supreme sacrilege when the blue iron teeth of false messiahs return to reign over the Potomac, long exploding its impure timber through the universal face owned by 100,000 poets I am or can be if only you, serpent from the inner mines, unload your main highway through the same state with no stop signs tattooed on the absence of public statuary. Though the state is perfect if gone to by the road that cannot end ever into you, eternal sleeper, who awaken in the automatic trance: this trajectory to everywhere I oracle, mania outfield pitched to the cyclone's rebirth.

The poem concludes on a note of visionary resistance, the mouth of black men forever sealed with heraldic signs is an image of the those victimized by the government of Washington and now relegated to the excluded and silenced of history. Yet these silenced gain a new life in the dimension of collective memory and witnessing which the poem attempts to summon us to, this in despite of the "blue iron teeth" which reign over the Potomac.

The idiom of this poem in its ferocity and in its carnivalesque and multi-tonal style takes up the surrealist approach at its most extreme and aggressive. Yet there is a certain public quality about it, especially in comparison to some of the other work we have examined. Perhaps this is produced by the controlling topos of landscape, however much that motif might be obscured by strange images. For whenever a poet speaks of a landscape, the tones of public prophecy cannot be far behind. This combined with the bizarre nature of some of the figures brings the work into the expressive realm occupied by a number of Spanish-speaking poets -- one might think of Neruda at his most violent and tormented in some of the *Residencia* poems, of some of the equally tormented and satirical passages in Lorca's *Poet in New York* and perhaps also of Vallejo. I cite this group of poets only to indicate that Lamantia's style, though unusual by American standards, is not so strange when seen by the standards of a more internationally dispersed late modernism which took its point of departure from Surrealism per se. Certainly it is not possible to give detailed analyses of these writers' relationship to each other, but it is at least useful to appreciate how what seems outrageous when viewed in a narrower context becomes less so, and even in some ways mainstream, when placed in a larger one.

For the truly outrageous we may turn to the poem “Flaming Teeth” which appeared in the volume *Blood of the Air*, published in 1970. This poem, like others by Lamantia from around this time, seems marked by the ongoing Viet Nam war. The theme of war, both in the political sense and in a broader metaphysical one, is therefore one of its preoccupations.

The style is somewhat different from most of the pieces we have looked at: the lines tend to be shorter, and there is less impulse toward developing complex harmonies of rhythm and sound pattern. This does not indicate any thinness of expression, however, only a greater tendency toward epigram and an apparent impulse to push the astonishing turns of association and image forward at an even faster pace, as though to hammer something though a barrier. The poem’s style in fact seems to combine the splenetic prophecy and invective found in Artaud with Peret’s more fanciful imagistic approach and some of his sharp irreverence.

The earthquake slivers
The broken nails of the nazis
Mister Fly and his obsidian mask
My father on his razor
Basalt nightmares
Megalithic godplanes click the xylophones
My wracking spit spits
Words are magic beans
Children of the flat-faced musicians
Cross the street into subtropical ice
Manuring down your hand split a hundred ways
By the onyx of baptism
Stop
I’m climbing
To genocide the look of you

The first section presents an almost opaque wall of images and metaphors. Yet two types stand out, those having to do with violence and cataclysm: thus we have earthquake, nazis, "godplanes" (which I would interpret as an ironic epithet for military aircraft) and genocide; the second group are geological -- images of stone and, perhaps related to that, ice: obsidian mask, basalt nightmare, megalithic godplanes, onyx of baptism. A world of stone is divided by violent cataclysm. The agents of this are sometimes human and sometimes natural. If human, they are in their mass rather than individual manifestations -- nazis and their godplanes -- and if natural, they are catastrophic in power and in magnitude -- earthquakes. Yet there is an absorption of both by the divine or the demonic (it is difficult to say which, the two tend to fuse here as elsewhere in Lamantia's work). The individual, the speaker himself, is threatened and harassed by a natural, social, and metaphysical violence, and eventually these come together in the final metaphor: " your hand split a hundred ways by the onyx of baptism." In this image the violence directed toward me originates in an Other who yet represents a metaphysical reality of some kind. The violence he does to me is in, and by means of, the natural context of my life. We might think of various sacred observances such as ritual scarifications, circumcisions, and the like, where a priest (or doctor) mutilates my body, for my own good of course. Yet here such particular and individualized violence is only the focal point of a larger and encompassing one.

The portrayal of this violence continues in the next section. Here the writing is just as dense and just as puzzling, yet the source of the violence seems to become more political and less metaphysical:

> A thousand shacks
> Human faces

Synthetic clouds
O for the slaughter America pinned on its bottom
I'd give up the rasp of Europe
Beatific visions sprawled on coat hangers
And weigh the silence with real screws
The fists of dawn
I'm still too intelligent
Become waste of years
Cruel whistling from under the snow inside the floorboards
And asleep drugged poet
You're safe striking the buttocks of the dream machine

We might interpret this as presenting images of poverty, the anonymity of urban crowds, perhaps of television news, chemical pollution, and the like. It creates a brief montage of images of destitution, ruin, and aborted possibilities. ("Beatific visions sprawled on coat hangers") The next two lines are syntactically difficult: "O for the slaughter America pinned on its bottom/I'd give up the rasp of Europe." Given the grimness of tone to this point, I take these lines to indicate a desire on his part for some sort of retribution against the United States, which is here seen as the source of the devastation the poem takes account of. Thus, paraphrasing: O I wish for the slaughter/ when I would see America pinned on its bottom, (pinned down that is). There are other ways to construe the lines of course. "O for the slaughter" might be mere exclamation, and the next phrase might be a descriptive characterization of the current state of American society and culture, in which it has hit bottom, or fallen on its bottom, and stayed there, pinned by the weight of its own stupidity and greed. In either case the vision is of an end-time. The rasp of Europe I take to be a metaphor based in the shamanistic practices Artaud recounts in his Tarahumara narrative. The rasp was a ritual stick, carefully fashioned and preserved, used by the Tarahumara in the Peyote dance and thought to have its own magic powers. 18

The rasp of Europe, therefore, is the sum of the traditions of poetic vision that the speaker has inherited and carried into the savage new world. He seeks to go beyond this tradition in prophetic clarity, and therefore a greater violence of image and vehemence of expression are needed to respond to a greater political violence than artists in the European tradition were ever confronted with. This in part explains his ambivalence toward his own vocation:

> Cruel whistling from under the snow inside the floorboards
> And asleep drugged poet
> You're safe striking the buttocks of the dream machine

The drugged poet is asleep within the culture that has nourished his dreaming with its traditions and its languages, both verbal and imagistic. It is this culture itself which is the subject of his dream; in fact it is both the dream in which he has taken refuge and the cruel whistling in the wind all around him. He seeks to awaken from it, to distance himself from the culture of exploitation and violence, even though it means distancing himself also from its traditions of poetry and art, at least to a degree. The extremity of the poem's idiom is prompted not only by the violence of history which it bears witness to; it is prompted, too, by the speaker's impatience and exasperation with his own position as mere poet, mere seer, and by his need to open a space of repudiation between himself and the traditions which have shaped him. To do this he must mar what he loves most -- poetic expression. This imposes a second and more hidden trauma within the overt one of history. To this latter he reacts with visionary denunciation, but toward the other with a grim self-mockery which torments his language, renders his images grotesque, and curdles the tone of his work to bitterness and disgust. Yet the main object of this wrath is and remains the horror and stupidity which are the main burden of the historical record.

There is a tremendous despair occasioned by this record, and, it must be emphasized, not merely by considering it but by living it and reliving it within the ongoing nightmare of the poetic imagination as it is informed by these catastrophes and crimes. For the poet does not present himself as a scholar, chronicler, nor even as witness; he is quite specifically *vates,* and his encounter with this history is in the context of the visionary dream. This means that he undergoes, albeit in imagination, the suffering and violence of the world. He endures it as the immediate affliction of nightmare, as opposed to the mediated concern of organized research. We sense the depth of this despair in the section's concluding lines, and find there as well some of the deliberately mixed idiom which he feels compelled to use in order to express his complex attitude of anger, despair, prophetic scorn and rueful self-doubt. It is, therefore, an idiom comprised of mythological references and pop culture ones, irony and indeed sarcasm:

> With rich tongue doorways briar and the lost look of Astarte
> With bleeding pens
> Dracula coins are the final exchange
> "M" on all the rooftops signs the invisible with your blood imperial
> and no more tempests in the tombs
> put them to sleep with the war angels

The state of total war is the concluding image we are left with at the end of this extraordinary section. The poem's form, though, is a kind of very rough and unrhymed quasi-Pindaric. And so we might expect a dialectical synthesis of some sort by way of closure. Yet closure in any normal sense does not seem the objective, and even the very concept of form must have a different meaning here in the context of an idiom so deliberately forbidding. Indeed the writing seems intended to defeat interpretation as

much as anything else. It might be compared with some of the things we find in Ashbery's the *Tennis Court Oath*. So:

They dream only of America

To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass:
"This honey is delicious
Though it burns the throat."

And hiding from darkness in barns
They can be grownups now
And the murder's ash tray is more easily –
The lake a lilac cube.

He holds a key in his right hand.
"Please," he asked willingly.
He is thirty years old.
That was before

We could drive hundreds of miles
At night through dandelions….

["They Dream Only of America"]

As I say, we might easily view this kind of work as intended to be baffling. To some extent, I feel that both authors, in these passages at least, attempt to create a cacophony of phrases, images, perhaps of voices, in which discernible meaning is only fitfully present, somewhat in the way one can find remnants of landscape or of human forms in abstract expressionist canvases. Or, to use a musical metaphor, it is as though they intended to create something like the chaotic soundscapes one hears in works by Charles Ives, or perhaps some of Coltrane's later pieces, where it seems that all the instruments are playing at random. Yet despite their apparent craziness, they do present recognizable motifs that emerge from the background of incongruous images and fused idioms. In the Ashbery texts, for example, one can discern repeated ideas of flight, of hiding, perhaps of secrecy; and one might guess that the idiom of the work is itself intended as a type of

secrecy, a coded text intended for initiates, or for members of a threatened minority. Go elsewhere, the passages seem to say, be secretive, construct your lines of flight. In Lamantia, there seems to be no possibility of going elsewhere. As in some parts of "Hypodermic Light," there is a sense of entrapment. There is no elsewhere. There is only a "here" characterized by a generalized violence which, in this instance, the poet sees as expressing itself in a kind of babble. Likewise there are no others; he addresses us, the readers, of course, yet in Ashbery one feels a kind of group selection and self-selection taking place around the poems, which often seem like confidences or invitations. Despite the floating and unfixed condition of the speaking voices, they seem to be seeking out community and seeking communication. In this phase of Lamantia's work, by contrast, the speaker seems decidedly isolated. He endures his negative context by himself, denouncing it as an affliction, and passing judgement upon it as an outrage, but he does not see any way of mitigating this condition by sharing it with others. We will discover in the next chapter that this is not the final word on this point in his poetry. Yet isolation within the harassed and tormented selfhood seems a fundamental condition of the poetic universe that he presents here. In keeping with this motif, we find the poet again employing the conceit of the seer afflicted by his own nightmare.

> Over the glades of dark statues that churn your retina priests of the Drag
> And the dust I clean my sugar with
> Knock down smoke over the everglades I'm american as rusting rain poltergeist
> salami
> And a hundred tongues at once
> Bumble Bee Heaven's my name
> Cycling in graves
> Little Joy Rider stuck in her prehensile gibberish

Into the orbitic Tilt Mechanism freely bestowed by the papal party
That secretly seduced the swollen ash
From which six billion shadows stood up
Every dictator I've invented
And dried up the oceans

There follows what appears to be a jumble of images and idioms, some of them reminiscent of advertising slogans. One is also perhaps reminded of passages from Gisnberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra," in which the country's moral and political failings, exemplified in the Viet Nam war, are sensed in the confusion of language, which presents a kind of public maelstrom of ideological slogans and sheer babble into which the country is descending. Yet Lamantia's passage does not aspire to the realistic reporting we see so often in Ginsberg (one of his great strengths). Instead, after an evocation of the landscape destroyed (for agribusiness again?) and perhaps one of the political oppression of the Caribbean, we find a kind of myth of anti-creation. Little Joy Rider is itself a palimpsest of idioms in the manner of Finnegans's Wake, fusing little red riding hood and something pornographic, with perhaps the memory of a name brand echoing in the background. One recalls the use of advertising in *The Bridge* in which the empty signs of capital are converted into a morning vision of possibility and are presented with an amused appreciation. Here things are different. There is instead a bleary scumble of distorted idioms that convey a decidedly rancid mood. We might even see it as a vision of some sort of anti-creation as little Joy Rider sticks prehensile gibberish into the tilt machine, bringing about an erection of ashes. Here the ongoing life of the species is viewed with horror; little joy rider is a kind of mythic embodiment of the total libidinal activity which is still extant even in this context, a libidinal economy of the abyss. The result, however, is only six billion shadows standing up out of ash, these shadows, though

unreal, yet contain the dictators who are the embodiment of the reign of terror the poem as a whole sees, condemns, and fears. A certain clarity returns in the next stanza.

> Drifting in my green dope cellar dream
> Mother of black immaculates and sneezing scapulars
> With the senatorial poets elect
> With sting ray for breakfast
> Juggling the clouds and weeping O the mystery of so many centuries
> Art with its capitols
> Imitating animal sounds
> Went by
> For this disquietudinous feather languishing infinity on a pedestal of shoes
> All the images of Jesus were slapped together like Israel
> And all was cool in the opium fields
> Panama was still born from eagles of Hydra
> There were so many birds bursting the hinges of Our Lady
> She was hallucinated on the clever spot the Son chose
> The Electric-Decretal Caesar-christus

The poet drifts in his "green dope cellar dream" -- "cellar" of course is a play on the word seller, thus the cellar into which the seller delivers you. Yet it would be wrong to think that residence in this cellar is merely a personal matter. Here art and religion are also sold and both for the benefit of "Caesar-christus," who is the source of the ongoing violence in all of its manifestations. A current of images with a clear anti-religious intent gusts into the poem. Yet by this point the weight of these apocalyptic images, their sheer number, their deliberately confused vehemence, grows oppressive to the poet (and to the reader), and his response is to turn away from it all. "I'm going to go to sleep" he informs us in mock-humor, which yet also recalls the tradition of prophetic slumber one see repeatedly in the Bible where the prophet, after receiving the word of God, must fall into deep sleep as a way of preparing himself to deliver the Word to the hostile world. The point in

common would be the idea that revelation is burdensome to the one who must bring it, and this bringing is itself a further burden.

The next section consists of five lines which stand by themselves, much quieter than the rest of the piece, a kind of eye in the midst of its hurricane.

> I shall say these things that curl beyond reach
> A fatal balloon
> Resolving riddles
>
> *It's pure abyss-crackling vortex*
>
> And silence opens her lips very much like arson

The most important lines here are the first and the last. The things which curl beyond reach are the sum of his visions as he has given them to us so far, and as he himself has had to endure them. Whose reach are they beyond, however? Ours? His own? Perhaps the tone here is a bit too knowing and too arch (too curled?). Yet there is a wonderful gravity to the section's last line. It is possible for artistic expression to find itself overwhelmed by the magnitude of what it seeks to compass and to sink into silence. Yet this silence would be undertaken as one undertakes an act of arson, as a destruction. A destruction of what, however? Of the possible dialogue with the current situation, the social and political context the speaker finds himself in. For to offer expression, even oppositional expression, even the harshest, is still to attempt a dialogue of sorts. If one feels this is hopeless, however, what choice remains except a turning away from such efforts? Perhaps this turning away is embittered here; it certainly seems to be resigned and also strangely determined. A willed silence is the word uttered to the mounting array

of crimes the poem has attempted to deal with. Certainly this resolution is arrived at only after an effort, an effort of expression, and we notice too that it does not last.

In the next sections therefore the focus is much less on the external context and more on the speaker himself.

> There's this silken road
> Down here I can invent the moth to kill memory
> Flay it alive
> With gasoline wings
> There's another road out of these rooms
> Into the streets of elegant gawkers
> Cafes have electric chairs now
> And this is no road to travel
> And this is the road to oblivion happiness
> Cutup on the unknown and another acre of poems
>
> Musick?
> Here come the flagons of Isidore Ducasse
> The speed which is happening
> And the grave compassion
> The riot was mainly in my mind
> Soon I won't be here stretched out on pillows of imaginary iron
> And the evil jinn leering into my dreams
> I'm vanishing like vanishing letters
> I can't bridge you reader you'll have to find yourself
> Going on slow as the blood I see drop over us

The moth with ignited gasoline wings, the moth to kill memory, is a wonderful metaphor for artistic inspiration, especially of a radical kind. The reason that it would need to kill memory, though, lies in the feeling of impasse that the section also conveys, the feeling that the imagination is or has become largely irrelevant in the current situation and that nothing in this larger context can really change. The poem ends, therefore, on a final note of despair, as the poet sees the blood dropping over us.

CONCLUSION

In these unusual works rejection of the natural world and of the political order are both expressed with a special and striking violence. Yet this "no" is spoken for the purpose of defining more clearly the proper object of affirmation. The erotic vision leads one to the Beloved with an intensity that seems to admit of no qualification, and the analogical process of affirmation, an expansion of Eros beyond the erotic narrowly considered, likewise has no qualification at first, for it has no spirit of negation and so no critical spirit within itself. Yet one cannot affirm boundlessly. It could be that the poetry we have looked at in this chapter at time suffers from an excess of ferocity and spleen, or from an excess of negative exuberance which renders the idiom somewhat too volatile in its rapid shifting of style and register and the form somewhat too disjunctive. The poet seeks an almost visceral intensity of expression, achieves it at times, and at times falls into incoherence. Yet even those passages which appear least successful possess a dark radiance, a kind of tense, vibrating energy, often the result of startling diction or an encompassing rhythmic energy which may be more steadily present and more artfully modulated than we are sometimes prepared to appreciate. They are seldom merely words. Yet no one can live in such a world for long, and there must at some point be a return.

NOTES

1 *Existence and Existents*, 57-64. A view of Surrealism similar to the one presented here, though hostile in spirit, is given by Sartre in his essay of the title. See *Modern Times* 187-188: "…by means of its symbolic annulment of the ego by sleeping and automatic writing, the symbolic annulment of the object by the production of evanescent objectivities, the symbolic annulment of language by the production of absurd and erratic meanings, and the destruction of painting by painting and literature by literature, Surrealism undertook the curious enterprise of achieving nothingness through an excess of being. It invariably destroyed by *creating*, in other words by adding pictures to existing pictures and books to already published books. Hence the ambivalence of its works: each of them can be seen as the savage and magnificent invention of a form, an unknown being…Nothingness hovers around it, a Nothingness that is merely the endless flickering of contradictions. And the *spirit* that the Surrealists want to attain over the ruins of subjectivity, that spirit which it is not possible to envisage except through an accumulation of self-destructive objects, also hovers, flickering in the reciprocal and hard-set annihilation of things. It is neither the Negativity of Hegel, nor hypostasized Negation, nor even Nothingness, though it comes near to that: it is more appropriate to call it *the Impossible*…." And yet it is really the Surrealist capturing, as it were, not of the impossible but rather of the *incompossible* that Sartre glimpses in this passage. Leibniz' concept and Levinas' are not the same, of course. But it is the underlying metaphysical significance of Surrealism that I would draw attention to.

There is relatively little discussion of Levinas' enigmatic concept of the il y a. See, for example,

2 We owe this phrase, of course, to Alain Badiou.

3 See Artaud's Tarahumara narrative,

Michaux's various experiences are recounted in

4 A selection of Artaud's later poetry – the portion of it we are specifically referring to can be found in Eshelman

see Jane Goodall's Artaud and the Gnostic Drama for a persuasive account of Artaud's gnosticism.

5 It is not that the original Gnostics would have understood these ideas in political terms, though they may have, but rather that a modern day writer might make use of them in that way. The political orientation of actual, historical gnosticisms is a matter of scholarly debate. See for example

6 *Dialogic imagination*

7 *Existence and Existents*. 57-64.

8 ernst bloch

9 patterson bk

10 Anti-Oedipus

11 I'm not sure why one would bring gold in order to do that. The Spanish were of course involved in a search for gold. Yet the line seems intended to refer to the overall fact of colonization

12 *Totality and Infinity*, 130-142; see also Lingis, *The Imperative*, 13-22.

13 "Carib Isle"

14 Charles Bauelaire, “Correspondances.”

15 The end of “Arsenio,” for example.

16 [trakl]

17 To name a few recent poets: Mark Levine, Leslie Scalapino, Michael Palmer, Jake Berry.

18 *Peyote Dance*, “The Mt. Of Signs.”

19 *Peyote Dance*, 55.

CHAPTER THREE GREEN: BECOMING VISIBLE

I

IMPERATIVE PERCEPTION

The world seems made for us to look at it, presenting itself as an open field for our gaze to dwell on and to dwell among, an endless expanse constantly soliciting not only sight but each of our senses and seeming to be entirely open to every type of curiosity. As I sit here writing, my gaze rises occasionally from my computer screen and encounters, through the open door, the field behind my apartment. Instantly an entire world is present to my eyesight, a world that seems, by being merely looked at, as directly comprehensible as the words taking shape on my screen. There seems to be no difference at all in accessibility, in the feeling of something immediately present and present *for* me, between the small black marks on a screen filled with light, on the one hand, and, on the other, all that I encounter by the smallest adjustment of my gaze: a range of trees distributed in no particular pattern, wild shrubs, tall grass, scattered groupings of wild flowers. Later I am sitting in a bar, drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. The thunderstorm which had been threatening all day arrives. The rain

washes the windows, and I watch what appear to be wave patterns, clover-shaped splotches, star-shaped bursts, Pollock-like bleeds run down the glass. There's a news stand on the street outside, a kind of shed, and the rain falls down onto the roof and onto a lower roof made of green plastic, which protects the rows of newspapers set out. Then there's a grated poplar tree nearby. I watch the rain come down on all of it. It strikes each surface in a different way and with a different rhythm: right before the tree, it's like a very fine aluminum mesh being lowered at a steady rate; in front of the shack, the drops are more distinct, and there's a gutter that runs along the edge of the roof. The water flowing down from this is slightly braided, luminous like steadily dribbled mercury -- at moments it seems to be an icicle hanging down. From time to time I look back down at the newspaper and pick up the story where I had left off. There is never any difficulty in doing this, nor is there any in orienting my vision when I look back out the window.

It is as if I am entirely enclosed by two worlds -- the visible and the legible, two worlds which yet have nothing in common, the one consisting of arbitrary signs, the other of the colors, textures, and tones which the world addresses to me and the spatial depths and temporal sequences in which they arrange themselves. Yet perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I inhabit two worlds which interpenetrate, like two circles in a diagram, and which are completely consistent in themselves, completely filled with themselves. I am possessed by the self-sufficiency of the visible and also by that of the legible -- both being present to me equally. Or rather I possess both and move effortlessly between them, nor is my circulation in one at all interrupted by my movement in the other.

And yet in the world of the visible I encounter what is *other*, and in excess of my thoughts and my means of expression, for no thought that I formulate and no description I compose can do justice to the reality which faces me or be in any sense definitive. It is strange, in a way, that my language is able to reflect this visible reality at all, since its formal signs and the visible signs of the world would seem to be incommensurable. And yet it does seem to be able to do so. It is not by merely opening my eyes, however, or by adjusting my gaze that I allow the visible to enter into my writing. I realize this as soon as I try to describe the field or the newsstand, as soon as I attempt to deploy words in such a way that they depict the visible in some manner. An accurate description is actually quite difficult to achieve. And a convincing portrayal of our visual experience presented in language is a remarkable event, and one that arrests our attention whenever we encounter it. It prompts a theoretical question as well. How is it that mere marks on a page are able to create for us, to conjure for us, these physical realities with such precision that we can even distinguish the particular style of description characteristic of one author's work from that of another, that we can do this with remarkably fine discrimination, and that our reading experience is so colored by this exact phenomenon -- the inscription of the visual in the legible -- that we sometimes discuss it as though it were the essential stylistic question. We habitually ask ourselves: to what extent does an author make me see, and in what way does he or she do so? With what clarity and with what nuances? With what apparent biases in imagery, but, more importantly, with what perspectives, what sense of distance and spatiality, what characteristic deployment of light and of shadow, what density of detail, and what apparent receptivity to the world's varied *qualia* -- color, texture, even smell and taste. The practices of phenomenological criticism may indeed

have indicated a prior and older possession of the textual by the visible, of language in its textuality, in its composed forms and in its institutional function as deliberate cultural and social sign -- that is to say, *as writing* -- by the world itself, in a sense by nature, by objects and events, indeed by *light*. In modern literature in particular, there is an incursion of the visible into the legible, the taking possession of linguistic signs by extra-linguistic ones, and thus of sign users and sign creators, sign originators and sign revisionists, by those same *visibilia*. Is it language that speaks? Or we who speak? Is it not rather the world which speaks, and which, in its speaking through our language use, permeates that language with its own signs, which are in fact events, the signs of the organic and non-organic life which, as Deleuze says, embraces the world? And is not the inscription of visuality in writerly style itself one of the most remarkable examples of this, the world's speaking? In its pictorial capacity, literary language is driven by an exceeding of itself as language in the direction of *manifestation*, and it is marked by an otherness which is, quite simply, the world. Of course, it is not accurate to say that the signs of the world are in language itself. They are rather in our memory, yet this memory is reflected in the way we use language, and especially in its considered, composed uses in writing. Writing, moreover, is never something that one does by oneself; one is aided in one's writing by all the previous writing one has read -- aided, influenced, in some respects hindered, or diverted from one's initial course, and, inevitably, prompted to disagreement or revision, disagreement with oneself and with others, revision of oneself and yet of others too. It is this entire interpersonal, this social process which writes. [1] In a collective way, we bring the traces of our immediate experience into our language use through a social process of revision and self-revision, of mutual confirmation, mutual

adjustment, mutual contamination. For is it not the case that in revising each other's descriptions, and the descriptions we inherit through the written tradition, we actually affect each other's memories, so that we seem to trade experiences, to inflect each other's recollection and judgement, and in a sense inhabit each other in that virtual dimension which it is the nature of language to bring forth within the human world? Is it not the case that we influence each other's concrete sense of reality, so that it may not be possible to say, for example, whether the way I render (and it is very much an affair of rendering, of conscious composition in a medium) the green of a plastic roof on a rainy day is the result of my own personal experience or was rather suggested to me by something I read. No doubt it is a combination of the two. No doubt these threads are impossible to disentangle. And yet what allows them to communicate with each other and to become entangled within me is my capacity to remember my perceptual experience (however vaguely, and it is usually quite vague) and the capacity of words to prompt my memories, mobilizing them and giving them an activity, a force, and what we might call a punctuality.

And yet there is something more, for the world seems to call to me, to demand that I respond to it in some way (and regardless of whether I have any particular aptitude for creative expression; it is not merely poets and artists who are called), and seems to place a demand upon me that I witness it and mark my witnessing in some fashion, although this witnessing and this marking can never be merely my own and are always influenced by the suggestions which stream into me from others and from that shifting and protean totality of others which is the social environment as a whole. Yet we recognize too that this descriptive capacity is manifest only at times or perhaps only

under special conditions. The earliest texts, for example, do not show it: *Gilgamesh*, the Bible, even Homer, are all remarkably bare of description. In them the world is grasped through a telling and hardly at all through a picturing or a showing. It would be beyond the scope of our discussion to speculate on the reasons for this bareness, as likewise on the historical conditions necessary for the visual to begin to be reflected in writing. Yet speculating in non-historical terms we might say that in order for the visual to be accounted for linguistically, the use to which language is put must be in part determined by, in the first place, the need to integrate non-linguistic signs and, secondly, the need to respond to inter-subjective demands. Perhaps both of these are found in the need to communicate factual information in practical affairs, and so the descriptive capacity develops as a result of scientific and technical advances. Yet it is not so much mere imparting of information I have in mind; rather it is the actual evocation of precise visual experience by means of words, exactly the sort of thing one looks for in literature (though, one would have it admit, it would seem to be an effect found primarily in modern work). And yet even so, to speak of how technical and scientific developments contribute to this descriptive capacity, which they certainly must do -- and one should understand by those terms things like primitive botany, early anatomy, the development of crafts of all kinds, perhaps exploration and migration -- is yet to speak in terms of pragmatics. However, for such pragmatics to be possible, there must already be something more fundamental in the nature of the human relationship to the world. What is our relationship to the world, then, and to its fundamental realities if the mere marks we organize can sometimes depict the visible itself, bringing it before our awareness with at times a startling clarity? [2] In this connection we can consider how Alphonso Lingis

proposes a rethinking of Kant's concept of the imperative. Kant recognizes that human existence is characterized by an imperative dimension. In thinking, I immediately become aware of a demand made upon me: specifically, to reason correctly. Thinking is, in this sense, a receptivity and an obedience, and the very freedom of thought makes this obedience possible. I am able to follow it because I have the freedom not to and my freedom itself is the medium within which the imperative reveals itself, becoming apparent, comprehensive, and mandatory. It is likewise the case in ethics: I recognize that I am obligated to conduct myself in a certain way -- so that the maxim guiding my conduct could become a universal rule, or so that others are treated as ends in themselves rather than as means, and, again, my very freedom to transgress these injunctions makes possible my meaningful obedience, the very meaning of that obedience being itself the substance of the imperative. In his book *The Imperative*, Lingis attempts to show that perception also should be viewed as an imperative.

> ...sensibility, sensuality, and perception [are] not reactions to physical causality nor adjustments to physical pressures, nor free and spontaneous impositions of order on amorphous data, but responses to directives....the movements of perception – both the controlled perception which is scientific observation, and the continual perception which is the scientist's, and our, life – are neither reactions and adjustments nor intentional and teleological acts, but responses. If perception is not a succession of mechanical determinisms, our perception exercises freedom because it obeys directives it finds in the environment.

Using phenomenological descriptions drawn from Levinas and Merleau-Ponty he gives an account of human sensibility in which the world, through perception, calls to us with an imperative force. It is not that we *can* see, touch, and hear; rather, we *must* see,

touch, and hear. Perception is an obedience, a responsiveness and a recognition which are demanded from us; in effect, it is a kind of concrete and immediate ordering. The world is neither data nor stimuli, nor is it a shapeless flux. It presents itself to us as a multi-dimensional demand. The light forces us to see it, and we are made to feel the wetness and coldness of the water. Indeed this wetness and this coldness are the media which order and direct my perception and become the means by which I perceive what I do -- myself immersed in the cold fluidity of the element, this element as it interacts with my movements and responses. Just as the face of the other, in Levinas' philosophy, places an unavoidable claim upon us, so, for Lingis, the world itself, in its manifold events, makes a direct claim upon our being. It forces us to respond to it, or, rather one might more accurately say, to participate in it in a way which is manifold, continuous, and at times mysterious.

Such an imperative is not an ethical one precisely. It is something else, something specific to the nature of sense perception and sensibility. Lingis' book attempts to characterize what this is and to clarify its nature. Yet there is still an ethical undercurrent to the very concept, *imperative,* and to the language in which it is couched -- demand, claim, directive. And of course it is based, in part, on Kant's categorical imperative, which is unquestionably an ethical concept. In Lingis' discussion, the Kantian imperative is combined with the careful descriptions of phenomenology, so that as we read through this sometimes startling work we see a special dimension of "ought" opening up within the realm of sense perception itself, and thus within our direct experience of the world. Even if we do not want to call this an ethical idea in the fullest sense of the word, an "ought" is still an "ought". In fact, one feels that Lingis would persuade us that the only

truly ethical person is one who, above all, is fully aware of the physical world in its absolute “thereness”, and, in a sense, participates in it fully and without reserve; that this keenness for the actual is a prerequisite for any further, and more refined, awareness or principled behavior. In this sense, Lingis recapitulates ideas we find in Emerson and in Thoreau. “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.”

And yet there may be cultural developments which push literary language away from this kind of direct and unmediated encounter with pure actuality. Surrealism was to some extent one of these. Did it not emphasize the dream above all? What then of writers who adopt a non-realist style? Who elaborate a baroque style of excess and exaggeration? We can say that they too formulate responses to the world, no doubt pressed upon them with equally imperative perceptions, although they deal with different aspects of it or with these same aspects in different ways. Yet the desire to make immediate contact with things remains, and it may even develop -- as though by an unavoidable process -- within an author previously devoted to other concerns.

SURREALISM WITHOUT THE SURREAL

In Lamantia’s poetry an increasing sense of the visual and the factual develops gradually over time. The gradualness of this development is a matter for speculation yet we might note that such writing, more attuned to the facticity of the world than the more overtly surrealist work we have looked at till now, requires a language responsive both to

the external as well as to subjectivity, and to the non-linguistic signs by which the visible is made available to us in perception.

A supper of iron and mercury
is spread out on a table of green water
and the knives, forks and spoons devour it!
I follow the light of a swayed bridge
and that old look's thrown up from the bay
at the sputter of dawn
Night does not come, held back
by pins and needles spilt from the sun
["Intersection"]

Or this description of exploring with a lantern the inside of a painted cave:

To be there
When the cave's luminescence is fraught with killer fangs
Curling stalagmites for a dinner of giants
Porous cadavers lean from turrets
Splash asian waters
Trapped here in Lemuria
The pink hoofs snarl
And part the sediments of a million years
["Redwood Highway"]

The new element here is the precise visual detail. When we read to the end of Lamantia's work we encounter, in effect, the birth of the visual out of the earlier surrealist baroque. We must ask what new dimensions, aside from visually evocative detail, this brings into the writing. Is it a question of evocative detail merely? What is the ultimate discovery?

Is it possible to have surrealism without the surreal? It might seem like a pointless question, yet in what way can a work be called surrealist if in its verbal surface it appears to be simply one more realist description? In asking this question, we will perhaps be prompted to consider the essential nature and purpose of Surrealist writing by being

forced to look beneath its surface features. The objective of surrealist writing for Breton, was the search for the Marvelous, which he defined as the beautiful, though, importantly, he preferred unconventional beauty and in particular the chance revelation of such beauty. The ultimate purpose was to foster an expansion and a heightening of awareness beyond the constrained perspectives of everyday life. It was this reawakening of perception and insight into the real which was the fundamental objective, however much this was pursued by means which were themselves so startling as to sometimes overshadow this underlying purpose. Yet a clear style was not in principle ruled out. More to the point, the visual, as opposed to the dreamlike, was always considered a possible means of revelation. For what was always sought, after all, was a revelation into the nature of the real, and the clarity of the visual, as in photography, can place that reality before us with particular sharpness. Even Breton was himself drawn to move away from the baroque mode at times, and specifically when confronted with some instance of natural beauty to which he felt compelled to respond. We find, therefore, the clear visual descriptions of sky, sea, and water birds of *Arcane 17*, or, to consider a different writer, Aragon, the factual hyper-clarity of *Paysan de Paris*. The factual and the visible must themselves be considered means of revelation. In this sense, there may be more connection between phenomenology and surrealism than is sometimes thought, and ultimately a greater political significance in both. Clear description is sometimes the best way for people to encounter unsuspected dimensions of their experience and unavowed aspects of their world. It is one of Foucault's main tools for just this reason.

As Anna Balakian points out, discussing Breton's prose works such as *Nadja*, and *L'Amour Fou*:

For him [Breton] any form of writing would be classified as poetry if it utilized as its mental movement the powers of analogy and proceeded on the basis of the unpremeditated relationship of images and of the mind's reaction to the phenomenaof the exterior world. The affective intensity of these phenomena was dependent not on a preliminary mental adjustment to them but on an a posteriori psychic acceptance of the mind's surprised reaction to events. The first process is effective for the interpretation of man and his world; the second is, as he thought, conducive to its transformation and extension. [103]

The mind's surprised reaction, however, may occur through the given of the eye, the given of sight, as well as through the given of the dream. Nor does the clear vision of the eye necessarily create a bias toward the "preliminary mental adjustment" characteristic of rationalizing inquiry. The eye itself surprises and is surprised. If this were not the case, there could be no intense Surrealist love for and use of photography, itself an indicator of its esteem for the eye and its responses.[3]

FOLLOWING THE THREADS OF THE EYE

Yet this visuality consists not only of visual details; it is more importantly a marking out of relations and networks of relations which draws a complex web between the speaker and others and the speaker and nature as an encompassing whole. Rather than a desiring subjectivity, he appears as an observing and participating body, as an embodied eye. We might think of it, borrowing a phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy, as a birth to presence, which comes about through the partial quieting of libidinal intensities and a greater connection to others in organized and collective activity. There is likewise a

somewhat greater concern for past experience, and so memory is consulted as a means of shedding light upon the present. In keeping with these developments, the voice in the poetry is no longer as incantatory as in the love poems. Nor is it marked by the turmoil which was so prominent in *Destroyed Works* and *Blood of the Air*. Here, for example, in the Ohlone mountain chain of California, he experiences a numinous moment and records it with a limpidity which seems to connect him directly to the natural object itself and which also seems to allow the experience to exist in two temporal dimensions at once, present and past standing together or, in a sense, subtly interleaved.

on that chain of Ohlone Mountains
shafts of light on a bobcat
through the thick madrones
first seen emblems that endure cupped my nine years
the great booming voice of nature
in the red bark's sloping labyrinth
who called my name
fetishes of pebbles and tabac in a redwood pouch
secret house of bark between the branches
["There"]

The first thing one notices is the absence of the "I". In addition, the fragmenting of syntax -- which before had been a way of increasing the excitement and agitation of passages -- is here a means of reducing the motility of the verse, allowing each perception to stand clear, as though in a moment of anonymous perception: it is anyone seeing, and the mode of seeing is that of a calm and factual witnessing which, in its very lack of drama, allows the object to stand in a stilled pool of revelatory light. Indeed the consultation of memory does not so much personalize experience as give it this double

perspective of past and present, whose purpose is as though to ratify the validity of perception itself. What appeared then, appears now also (in memory), which unfolds the experience's full significance not recognized at the time. An interesting detail occurs in lines 5-6: "the great booming voice of nature/in the red bark's sloping labyrinth". The voice makes itself heard in the labyrinth of the tree's bark, which the boy is examining carefully and up close. The next line "who called my name" must be a question, occurring both then and now. Following this, we find a series of remarkably fresh images, which focus the scene visually. And yet, for all that, aside from such details the most telling aspect of the experience is the voice and the call. To heed a call is to become receptive to a vocative power and thus to be involved in a vocation. Those who do so are servers and yet also seekers. Therefore beneath the level of rapt seeing there is this further dimension of *searching*. This is what separates the current speaker from his earlier self. This search has not been merely for a place but also for a relationship. What is the proper and currently possible relation to the natural world? This political question unfolds silently beneath the poem's surface.

For this reason, along with the birth to the visual there is as well the adoption of a conversational mode, a speaking to others. And so the relationship with the physical world that is sought must be understood as a communal one. The subjective dimension, so well conveyed in the hushed stillness of the moment, can lead only so far. It is like the tree bark itself, a fascinating surface of involutions with yet little depth. The labyrinth leads not deeper in but rather *elsewhere*. An alternate dimension has to be recognized, that of the community itself.

Forty years ago I was born from a crumpled tower of immaculates

that twist like the fleeting damaged bridge torrential rain on a
road near Chehalis
Love driving through her native land the
Beauty
of all I've received from her....

none shall ever steal from me our sixty eyes to the smoke hole at
the Tipi flue
embers of sacred earth – the myth has not lied –
a poor man like they – old in the vision of the floating tipi over
the hideous towns below – once with the gods they say – but
I'm no metaphysician, stop short of the crumble of dogmas—

I send up the song I could not sing this land my stony prayer
people of human misery
repetition shall not make it less than our hearts entwined
I am your mystery as you are there among the Pleiades
ancient ones only you shall see us through
["Native Medicine"]

The ability to perceive the world is partly conditioned by one's membership in a community of others who share this perception and from whom one learns this attentiveness, just as in Merleau-Ponty's famous analysis I learn the green of the lawn from my companion's perception of it as well as from my own. [4] This common perceiving is formalized through a ritual into a witnessing, and this gives birth to the kind of communal participation that we see here. Direct experience evolves into a specifically ethical disposition, a way of being which is a vehicle for the discovery of the world and for its proper valuing. It is therefore the specific ground for all other values. This aspect raises the passages above mere nature appreciation. It is rather an ethical experience, and political in the broader sense, since it deals with the question of what should be the basis of community, and, to some extent, with what we would now call "sustainable communities." In answering this question, the passages seem to suggest a three-fold relation as the matrix out of which productive relations between people and between

people and the environment might arise. Rather than a dyadic relationship of self and object, or the triadic oedipal situation, there is in this model of a complex of folded or interleaved relations. There is first of all the self in its personal history (a historicity which yet does not limit its ability to perceive anew and afresh in the present moment but instead seems to foster it) a history, a memory, which must be questioned in order for the full significance of past and present to emerge. The self's relation to its experience is therefore a seeking out, and yet it seeks not experience merely, but a principle of productive relatedness to others and to the world. For this reason one goes to the woods not only to see their beauty but also to learn how to correct shortcomings in oneself and failures in one's life -- the imbalances, the inattentiveness, or the self-absorption which prevent one from really seeing the things before one -- one's companion in his or her joy or trouble, or the world in its. As though ranged around this questing and questioning self, there is then a plurality of others, who do not stand in opposition to one but create a kind of fold within which the "I" and the "other" share experience and communicate it to each other. It is, therefore, not a contestatory site, and is modeled neither upon the competitive marketplace of liberal capitalist imagining nor upon the disputatious *agora* of classical culture. It is rather a space of cooperation and mutual attunement. These others provide the ratification of one's own perception in a relationship of direct and mutual supplementarity: no one is replaceable by anyone else, in contrast to the rank and file of an assembly line and of the military. And yet likewise no one is absolutely unique. Rather each individual supports each other in a total participation and observance: there are sixty eyes watching at the tipi's flu. As a kind of outer layer, outer in the sense of being at the immediate point of exposure, there is yet the individual self in its direct

relation to the natural objects -- trees, grass, earth and the more diffuse presences -- air, wind, light -- which it encounters, and finally there is this self in its active cooperation with others in a context of purposeful action within that larger natural context.

Likewise there is no conflictual relationship between the human community and the environment. Nature is seen as the ground which supports the human and out of which it arises, as opposed to being merely a fund of resources to be used. The fact that the passage (and similar ones scattered throughout the later poetry) is organized around rituals suggests, too, that from the speaker's standpoint, and from the standpoint of the values he would advocate and which he sees embodied in these aboriginal cultures, societies which *do* see the natural world as a store of resources to be used, even if wisely used, are still in some sense deluded, for such a perspective remains always too anthropocentric and blind to the basic realities which are directly in front of one and which confront one with special clarity as soon as one leaves the realm of freeways and office buildings, to say nothing of the mental freeways of the consumption mentality. The rituals enable him to recognize the meaning of what is directly in front of him by placing it before him in such a way that he must participate in it rather than merely observe it. Having done so, he knows that those who persist in seeing the natural world as "resources" are simply blind and deaf. It is as if the ritual covers the peculiar individual personality with another and more generic self which can harmonize more easily with its context and thus perceive it more clearly. One sees no longer as a desiring subject, an I, but as a pair of human eyes which now see as eyes of flesh are given to see; one touches with a human hand, which feels and knows as a hand of flesh and bone is given to feel and to know, and one moves in the rhythm of the ritual and over the cleared surface of

dirt, leaves, or grass as a human body is given to move, to sense, and to respond to its world, which is now the world held in common with these others, moving likewise, seeing, hearing, feeling and doing likewise, and therefore also knowing as and what one also knows. The insights the observance makes possible are never the special property of any one person; indeed, they are immemorial and therefore not the possession of any one time, or of any one generation. Others who enter and leave the circle are, in a sense, others of the past and of the future. Yet there is a total observance of the world which is built and perpetuated in this process occurring across time and across persons.

Certainly it must be said that the speaker's experiences are strange, perhaps in some ways extreme, and they do not exclude the use of hallucinatory drugs. Yet his tone remains remarkably conversational. It seems to suggest that there is an openness, an accessibility in these insights, as opposed to a secrecy. Though he undergoes initiation, what he is initiated into is yet not occult. Everyone may participate equally in these truths, which because they are based upon perception are not mysteries, although the full substance of the vision is perhaps given only to those privileged to enter into the rituals in the fullest sense. Yet the basic truths are open to all just as the light of day is, or the darkness of night. As a result there is a more direct and communicative tone in much of this later poetry that distinguishes it from the elaborate idiom of the erotic poetry or the riddling, convulsive, and violent expression of the more gnostic work. There is an imperative of communication placed on the speaker as an individual privileged to have a more-than-ordinary command of words.

To speak of writing and of communication is to speak in term of history and of tradition. There is always an historical dimension to communication. But can there be an

historical dimension to the imperative experience itself? The rituals in question make one aware of the need to witness the priority of the earth itself, a demand which is made upon each individual even in perception itself. Yet we see that this imperative does have an historical dimension too, since the rituals themselves do; it is not really an affair of timeless moments. The rituals and everything connected with them are the result of an attentiveness which does not merely occur, however much the experience that it is based upon might strike the observer with an extraordinary force by virtue of its sheer beauty, dignity, or uniqueness. Rather such attentiveness and such receptivity presuppose instruction, albeit of a special kind, and this instruction, which these aboriginal societies have preserved in their rituals and lore, must be preserved. The ability to impart it and the disposition to receive and to understand it are cultural achievements that must be carefully guarded. The speaker recognizes this ongoing project in the native groups he visits and whose hospitality he accepts, and this recognition, as much as the magnificent natural setting, contributes to the tone of reverence which is a distinguishing feature of this phase of his work. Interestingly, it seems to be this very respect which requires the more conversational and speaking mode that we see in these pieces.

AN ETHICS OF ENCOUNTER

This recognition of the ecological as a special and ethical demand of our time, and one that is most fully acknowledged by marginalized aboriginal groups, brings Lamantia's work close to some of the poetry of Gary Snyder and Adrienne Rich. It is less familiar than theirs, and yet he was involved with the actual life and rituals of these

various Native American tribes as early as 1952. It would seem that the experiences took a while to filter into his work, however. The following passage is from the poem "Redwood Highway" published in the 1981 volume *Becoming Visible.*

> To dream of you acorn wheel
> The lean-to takes a breath of burning cedar chips
> The old tobacco traveling the directions of space
> Air earth fire
> And the wings of scopolamine
> Washo peyote yana Cora
> Even to the crystal web of central dreaming among the Californias

Unlike other literary experimenters with hallucinogens, such as Henri Michaux, Lamantia's purpose is not the exploration of consciousness itself. Rather his search is for a revelation of the truth of nature as well as insight into how to live harmoniously within it. He seeks a kind of fundamental encounter with it, one more genuine than we can normally have in our everyday experience, in which we are distracted by petty concerns and self-absorbed preoccupations, a distraction which the culture of consumption reinforces in every possible way. He seeks in addition the inspiration which one needs in order to persevere in a mode of living, in an espousal of values, which are in conflict with those of the dominant American culture. Yet he takes this inspiration only in part from the hallucinogenic experience itself; a large part comes from the ritual and from the example of the people and their culture, which he feels is more balanced, more sane, and, unlike American culture, not devoted to destructiveness and greed. In the passage quoted above from "Native Medicine" the image of the sixty eyes is clearly one of harmony within a community and the harmony of this community as a whole with its natural environment. The poet's encounter with nature is mediated, therefore, by this meeting

with a foreign culture and it becomes, in effect, an encounter with that culture as well and with those people and the values they have developed in the course of their history. The writing that eventually resulted is essentially secular and addressed to the contemporary American audiences which might read it, yet it also shows the mark of a sacred dedication in its attempt to bear witness to the communal life of older and more balanced societies. In keeping with this dual objective, the verse moves between the confessional mode, which direct witnessing requires, and a more archaic naming or tallying, as we might call it, following Whitman, familiar from epic verse and from Whitman himself, in which things, individuals, or groups are named in lists -- a gesture of inclusiveness in which memory recognizes that it is invalid outside of the total community it seeks to recall, and that the constituents must be named, touched upon individually, however briefly. This naming commits the verse to a round of memory that must also be a round of places and of events shared with others. It obeys an imperative of circulation, of comprehensive and inclusive acknowledgement, and organizes itself in continuities rather than in the ecstatic moments of the erotic mode.

An ethic of encounter is present, therefore in this work: the world and the others in it must be directly seen, and the writer now demands of both his work and of himself a responsibility toward the web of relations he finds himself among and in fact seeks to enter more deeply. These relations are like threads moving outward in every direction and dimension to include an increasing array of things, places, animals, people, and times -- cave paintings and other prehistoric artifacts, the flora and fauna of the west and Pacific coast, the aboriginal people themselves. If the image of the speaker created by the early poetry was that of an erotic supplicant, or perhaps victim, the figure that confronts

us now is that of a shamanistic observer, participating and yet also witnessing. This witnessing and the participating do not lack a reflective aspect. The speaker questions his own past, and likewise, the relationship which he enacts with the various communities he is part of -- the white world and the culture of aboriginal people. In addition, these relations extend over time, and the thing which draws him to the aboriginal culture is in fact a tradition, which is of course temporal. Yet the dimension of encounter, of direct witnessing and participation is crucial; it is in fact the fundamental thing, the thing that makes them real and compelling. One responds to the tree only when one is in front of it, seeing it; one must participate in these native rituals or at least witness them. The Other -- whether human or non-human --makes its claim upon me only in proximity, and in a present moment. The awareness achieved in that indispensable moment, however, can be extended over time with the help of others. The face to face encounter of ethics must be enacted in this way, as a direct encounter, and yet it can be extended to other than humans, and in fact to nature itself. It can and must be extended to the world. In this work, the exploration of awareness pioneered by Surrealism is enacted in a new way, outside of the exclusive and restricted context of writing alone and the equally restricted context of the individual and his or her desiring subjectivity, and for the purpose not merely of enlarging awareness but of enlarging it in a particular way – the fostering of a greater receptivity of individuals, especially Americans, toward other cultures and toward the environment.

THE CLAMOR OF BEING/THE BIRDS

And yet we do not merely see the world, we hear it as well. And part of what we hear, when we actually listen, is the sound of birds. One of the more interesting developments in Lamantia's later work is an on-going fascination with birds, with their songs, their movement and their flight, and sometimes, it would appear, with their names. He tells us for example:

> Only man and the bird are divine. Coasting on folds of air, the White-tailed Kite meets its mate, the great sun of love, between the paint of feathers – touch in rigorous thought. The vision situates who we are like an oracle of another world. Whoever meets the sudden revel seers the earth's renewal.
>
> ["Ship of Seers"]

In this later poetry, birds are a kind of embodiment of the creative energies of nature. Unlike humans they are not bound to the earth but merely touch down upon it and then leave it once again for the air. Their life is therefore a continuous leaping beyond into the condition of flight and a surpassing of mere vocalization in actual song. They are, therefore, an appropriate image for an ecstatic existence which always moves past its current state into an excess, a transcendence of some kind, though the exact nature of this is left vague and wavers between a naturalism of some sort and an unspecified supernaturalism. Yet we might think of it, rather, as the transcendence of one condition of nature by means of another more dynamic one, a luring of nature beyond itself and through itself in the course of its own creative activity.

So few of us
If the seed be
Become scythe, its own end
As wheaten being
Germinates a songbird's form
We, too, were once avian
Bridge – window – to another life
So they do know us
Though now in terror
A few listen with attention –
Instant Ornithos, rare
Flashing cordial of communicating grace –
Who see what I imagine they become
Their gestures speak deep silence,
Flying hearts, before they take off
And primordial gnosis takes flight
To carry seeded mandibles on the wind
Who are clothed in primary colors
Range, breadth and tones of what
Red streamed from
Then, branching leaves envelope
Perching forms beneath
A swathe of indigo

["Passionate Ornithology is Another Kind of Yoga"]

Here the birds are embodiments of a natural energy which yet transcends any given condition, first in the way that seeds are transformed into the life of a living creature (a startling fact if one thinks of it), and then in the way their bodies themselves surpass mere earthly subsistence in actual flight and in song. Even their gestures are expressive -- they speak with a deep silence, we are told. The reason for this is the fact that the silence around them is the void which surrounds life as such, the entropy into which it sinks; it is also the void into which the birds launch their songs, songs which then stand out against the silence all the more clearly. Yet their flight is not simply a means of transport. It is

itself a knowing, a more-than-rational knowledge which is embodied and active rather than cognitive. Harold Bloom, for instance, in his various discussions of gnosticism, reiterates that the peculiar knowledge it gives is not of a conceptual kind and not amenable to abstract expression; it is rather something acted upon and lived. It is in this sense that Lamantia applies the term to the flight of birds: "A primordial gnosis takes flight." Flight is, after all, one of the most complex types of behavior imaginable, and in its massive energy expenditure quite beyond any human capacity. And yet it is more than this, for it possesses its own aesthetics, its own complex and subtle style, each bird flying somewhat differently and having its own peculiar song. It is easy to see it, therefore, as a type of embodied knowledge of the earth, of the terrestrial as such. Thus the poet imagines them flying into the wind to perch in the leaves of a tree, and as they do encountering more than just the air but also the light itself and, with that, the energy of the sun in its entire spectral range from infra-red to ultra violet. Birds do in a way embody a knowledge of the earthly that is beyond what we could naturally possess. They are the earthly flung forward into the cosmic, though they in fact never reach it. Yet in being this they somehow epitomize the natural and the earthly at its most beautiful -- in its continual transcendence of the merely physical in the direction of the expressive, the beautiful and the apparently liberated. The fact that they encounter light across the entire range of its spectrum gives the passage quoted an interesting purchase on mysticism. The symbolism of light is well known, and yet here it is a light beyond light, a more-than-visible, which, if we did encounter it, would actually be dangerous to us. The otherness of nature and the extremity of the spiritual are joined in this metaphor of an invisible and dangerous radiance which conveys the rarity of the ecstatic condition sought and its

distance from any mere humanism. Certainly one can see how the birds and their condition function as an example of all that the visionary sees as most inspiring in nature itself and as a kind of moral emblem for how he would seek to live. It is a vision directly opposed to that of the typical American consumer, mired in mere enjoyment and in a static possession.

In fact one is reminded at times of the mythology of birds created, in an entirely different medium, by the composer Olivier Messiaen. For Messiaen, it is not enough for music to imitate bird song, in the manner of numerous composers down to Respighi. Instead it should incorporate the elements of actual bird song, though in a way free of any direct mimesis. Accordingly, we are told that the composer did field work in which he notated the actual songs and calls of birds, which he then integrated into his compositions, using them in ways similar to the way serial composers use their tone rows. In this way, guided by his mystical Franciscan Catholicism, Messiaen attempted to bring the reality of creatures not ourselves into his music. Is what Ernst Bloch asserts in the *Spirit of Utopia* true, that we hear only ourselves? Or is it rather the case that we hear the world, and that our own utterances are responses to the totality of the world's sound? [5] Yet these sounds are not merely incidental results of movement and activity; they are expressions of the total life, both organic and non-organic, which creates the world as we know it and which comprises its manifold process and its single yet manifold reality. The sounds of the world are the clamor of being and an indication of life's tendency to surpass itself in an excess which we might think of as the natural basis of creativity in humans. It is a natural elan shared by animals and to some extent the rest of nature as well. Composers like Messiaen (Charles Ives is another example) are interesting because

of their attempts to introduce into their musical structures the clamor of the world as it is. The results are sometimes raucous -- as birds themselves often are -- at other times weirdly beautiful. Yet it is an attempt to bring a primitive energy itself into even its most sophisticated manifestations. Ultimately it points toward the oneness of human creativity with its natural basis and natural context, an insight which some cultures have never forgotten, yet which western culture has tended to. Perhaps this forgetting has reached a critical point, and so there may be a special timeliness to Messiaen's efforts of returning even the latest fruits of an enormously complex tradition to their most primitive source. In Lamantia's late poetry there is certainly a similar effort.

Yet is it possible for poetic representation to allow the wild being of nature to appear within its crystalline structures, in view of the fact that its forms and its language reflect our nature and the structure of our perceptions and in fact our desires and dreams? Can poetry step outside of itself and allow the events of the world to appear within its restricted economy? Perhaps the form of some of these later pieces reflects an effort to achieve a writing that will make this more likely. Thus it seems less carefully structured than what we have sometimes seen in the previous work, moving from event to event in a relatively non-heirarchical fashion, as though to imitate the free movement of perception itself within its field. There is also, as we have already mentioned, an uncharacteristic modeling of poetic expression on conversation itself, and perhaps we might see this, once again, as a way of moving its locus outside the confines of the individual person and into a transpersonal space. We see here a point in common with Ammons, though the conversational mode is certainly the most widely practiced in contemporary American poetry. Yet in these two poets, at any rate, it is used for the purpose of making the

interpersonal the shared background for a movement beyond the human and toward a consideration of nature in its completely independent existence.

> Today tropic birds in winter overhead as if I knew something
> cubicles of wandering sound
> wild parakeets to the lighthouse on the hill
> this is the dream of the supernatural land
> from rocking to it, what was once pain
> is the bliss of it
> the green demons with silvery genitalia rain down the flags of
> omnivorous pines
> dilating light

Here the birds in their activities amid the trees are a multi-dimensional event, almost a kind of mobile sculpture addressed to the ear, "cubicles of wandering sound," which carries the speaker beyond himself into the dream of the supernatural land. The audible carries one beyond what is merely present to observation, as the birds in their song and movement dilate the light itself, pressing our sense of the world beyond the merely visible. In Merleau-Ponty we encounter the idea of "wild being," that is, a level of reality entirely independent of our concepts and of our language. Usually, however, his attempts to clarify this idea centered on considerations of visual phenomena, a bias which is almost habitual in western philosophy (a minor instance of which is seen at the opening of this chapter). Yet in his mythology of birds, Lamantia attempts to gain an intuitive sense of the nature of reality, of its independent life and of its dynamism, through an attunement of the ear to what escapes sight, an attunement to sound itself as the most dynamic sign of the world's life, and beyond that, an attunement to music, the art in which sound is prompted beyond itself through an ordering and a *mathesis* and so into the luminous paradox of repeatable novelty, in which the forms of existence as such seem to

be given a vibratory evolution, a permanence, and an exemplary transitoriness all at once. For does not music exist as the world itself does, welling up out of absence, passing and yet somehow abiding, and leaving traces and shapes in memory? Yet the music which moves him the most is that of bird song. Should we not exclude this, though, from the category of music? Do we not hear only ourselves? I think Lamantia would answer no, that art is not an exclusively human activity and that it is a surplus of the life of the world. It is perhaps an enigmatic and mysterious surplus, as language itself might be, and yet the world's life is also enigmatic and also mysterious.

TREE

The slab of secrecy Wordsworth rays with remembered light
 the luminous forest of wakened subjects birds weaving his words
the voice of El Senor the cape in the umbrella of voices
exchange of crowns on the watery steps Never Before intricate
 movements of subliminal audiation, fade-outs in the fabric of words
 the laryngeal vibrations of the crow of thought
fading steps to language
a few sparrow notes in the dense fog
a heraldic demon of the moment
Exactly perhaps perhaps exactly
it rains horse pearls of anglais from Alert Bay…
the seething pit on the cubicle to strain the bit
Old pony
from the antediluvian age has carried man from the beginning
 to the end if only a shadow now
the eyes of ka-ka
 in the circle, their ten eyes glowing
with the clay figure
the old ones on the polished abalone shell…

It is a poem of awakening and of piecing together a consciousness of the external and the internal simultaneously. Because of this the rhythms are fluid and the syntax fragmented, consisting mostly of phrases without finite verbs. The effect is a braiding of internal and external in which hearing, sense of place, and an as yet rather vague visuality combine with memories of poetry amid the gradually developing self-awareness of a linguistic consciousness. Human language dawns within consciousness as the day itself is dawning, yet this language is attended by an awareness of events in the external world which now seem to be a type of speaking in their own right, or to be, as it were, the *incipits* of language. Being speaks itself in these first moments of consciousness which are marked by a kind of inversion of sense impressions in which hearing is more important than seeing. For it is by sound that the world makes its reality most immediately known, and in a way that grips us physically with a vibratory envelopment and possession. Here it is very gentle, as though the speaker were wrapped in a gauze of vague sounds, bird calls, the wind perhaps, and the sound of water. It is by means of these numerous sounds that the life about us in its manifold activity becomes known in a way that cannot be as readily objectified as when it is presented to us visually. Instead its encompassing presence works its way into us as though by osmosis and penetrates perhaps to a deeper level. Through sound, music, and the complex acts of hearing and listening, the life of the world is communicated to the mind and to the body, which then participate in this life, this activity, for both mind and body are lured across an imperceptible threshold within hearing itself, a liminal space in which the hearer and the heard seem to become one. This participation is itself creative and brings forward its own surpluses, in this case thought itself, here personified as a crow. The birds outside and the bird within reflect each other

and are counterparts, however obscurely, for these others call the latter forth and at moments the difference between them becomes vague. By this means the *inside* is created as a dimension, or rather it is created and creates itself, for it cannot be understood as a mere passive *hyle* molded by externals. It is a kind of fold in Being which brings into existence a special dimension, that of awareness and creativity which are themselves activities and acts. This movement of consciousness, this dawning of the *within*, is for human culture the signal event, the transition from one state of being to another. Here it is represented by a bird taking wing, transcending the stasis and the mere rule of gravity in an excess of animal vitality, transcending it likewise in song, which, in its matinal eloquence, seems to surpass in lyrical beauty what would be necessary for territorial marking, mating, or other errands of mere survival. Likewise human consciousness has its own self-transcendence. It is thought itself, personified here as a crow, a dark and heavy bird to be sure and yet a bird nonetheless and capable of flight. The dawning of thought is an event marked by a *Never Before.* The unspoken of nature is somehow becoming spoken in the music of the birds; and this means that its existence and life are now becoming recognized more completely by the consciousness which is developing around them and in relation to them. This recognition and this relationship comprise both a being-across-from and a being-within, for the indistinctness of that separation between hearer and heard, that vague near-fusion which the fragile yet distinctive liminality of hearing allows, allows also for a near-inhabiting of the object, a following of it so closely as to almost seem (to consciousness itself) to be a following of it from within, to constitute an inhabiting of it. Consciouness thus finds itself with two *insides*, two inner dimensions simultaneously -- its own and yet that of another thing. The two follow each

other, haunt each other for a while, though without fusing, in the indistinct region of the twilight state. Here we see not only the dawning of *within* and of language but also the inhabiting of both sides of a line between subject and object. We see, therefore, the dawning of mimesis, that strange power by which one makes oneself like the thing, like the other, by allowing the other to grow up within oneself, to arise within one, while yet remaining distinct in its own being.

We see that the poem is at bottom about thresholds and the crossings they prepare, demarcate, limit, and prompt. For the self-surpassing of nature and of the human mind is drawn forth by the liminal structurings, the borderings, which yet are not merely limits but active powers themselves, lures, to use a Whiteheadean term, which seem built into the structure of the world like the grain in wood. These borderings are mysterious perhaps, yet the mystery is part of the theme and attends the poem at every point. The poem enacts and records the mystery of the coexistence of nature and mind by means of its atmosphere -- a veiled, hushed, and listening mood and an attending upon the event, the pure event of the step beyond. This crossing and these thresholds can be numbered according to kind: there is the physical as such toward the expressive; arising out of this there is a further crossing, that of sound toward song. Then the outside surpasses itself in the incipient dimension of an inside both created and self-creating: hearing is crossed in the direction of a *listening* which is its fulfillment and its surpassing. And finally the last threshold crossed is that from muteness into language. Yet why is this final crossing presided over by the allegorical Never Before?

Language itself, of course, in its human form is a unique power in the world, and so its advent is a thing unexpected in the natural context. It is the unlikely and the

unpredictable, and it constitutes in its very inwardness, paradoxically, an outside, an otherness to the natural world and, most likely, to animal consciousness. Its moment of expression, the moment at which words are conceived in the mind, is always a unique event, and a response, first of all, to the solicitations of the world, a response which always occurs in a now, creates that now as a focal point for the mind, making of it a meeting space as though of two waves, the one coming from the world and its occassions, the other gathering within the economy of the mind in a coalescing of attention, perception, and affect. At that moment there is a crossing of some kind: the forms, the patterns, the activity of the outside prompt an event in the mind, which has, in its focal particularity, no longer the character of mere activity but something also of an act. Language is a flow, yet it is also something we perform. It is not necessarily subject to our will or to a supervising *cogito*, yet it is not merely autonomous activity, as many of our physical processes are. It is rather a kind of surpassing of mere perception and mere attention, mere consciousness, in the direction of a new dimension -- the conceptual. Such a surpassing happens, for human beings, repeatedly, yet every time is a kind of first in that it marks the moment with an epochal significance, setting it aside and apart. However, though this process is distinctly human, at least as far as we know, we yet can recognize analogues and parallels to it in nature, and this recognition may perhaps prevent a certain arrogance in humans, despite the fact of their having this unique capacity. Certainly it seems that the poem, in its quiet and stillness and in its sense of waiting, is imbued with a feeling of humility and a reverence for the external presence which as yet is but dimly witnessed, as though at a remove -- the physical remove of the speaker and the further remove created by the occlusion of his awareness and by the

absence of visual knowledge. With the beginning of language, he comes into a fuller presence before the world, and yet it is not a possessing on his part, but rather a sharing or a participation which the world allows him. Still there is the unique occurrence of the word.

> We become unaware of the contingent element in expression and communication, whether it be in the child learning to speak, or in the writer saying and thinking something for the first time, in short, in all who transform a certain kind of silence into speech. It is, however, quite clear that constituted speech…assumes that the decisive step of expression has been taken. Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks the silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world.
>
> [*Phenomenology of Perception* 184]

We see here a breaking of silence as such, the inaugural moment of speech and therefore of the human, and we witness this as though at its initiating point. For this reason it is a *Never Before*, a primal inauguration, the beginning of that fundamental relatedness to reality which constitutes our human world in its humanness. It is not that it has never happened before, indeed it is always happening, and yet we are continually losing sight of the profundity of this basic fact, the fact of speech prompted by the event and becoming itself an event; we forget it amid the commonness of ordinary communication, of our typical thoughts and normal internal monologue. Here all that is absent or stilled by the fact of earliness, of incipience, and so we witness the Beginning.

And yet there is a waiting, a preliminary silence. Likewise here we see a moment of preparation, a subliminal and still motion of the mind toward utterance, which it yet must wait upon as upon its own moods, as upon its own sleep, something which arrives of its own accord and which cannot be forced or rushed. And yet there is a sense of

expectancy. Here there is the basis -- or one basis -- of the human sense of its own dignity. With a kind of presentiment which is the combination of knowledge and un-knowing, it senses the presence of its own speech even before its arrival, and it attends upon the incipience of this event with a confidence and a dim exultation, knowing full well that it is this about-to-be of speech which marks it from the rest of nature, upon which it yet also waits, for both word and world will, in a sense, arrive together. And yet there is no real possibility of an excessive pride or arrogance. The humanism we see here is not of that order. The basis of human dignity is shown only in its barest manifestation and in its simplest and humblest form. The single word which is called forth by the external context is not a word of mastery, for mastery can never have a Never Before. It is by definition an Always or a Yet Again. It is instead the word of participation and witness, the witness of the world itself, and it signals an expectancy and a hope. It is possible to live, and it is possible to live in harmony with nature. The excess which one is in the world and which one's speech and higher faculties are does not need to render one forgetful of the priority of the world itself or of the smallness of one's capacities, the dependency of one's place, or the fragility of one's beginnings. The speaker is fully aware of all this, it would seem, even at this earliest phase. We might feel that this foreknowing of limits which yet excludes irony is a kind of lateness in itself, and excludes naivete as well as irony. In surpassing itself, creating its own surplus in expression, the human does not separate itself or mark its definitive separation from nature. It rather enacts a self-transcendence as expression which nature itself is continually undergoing.

THE TRANSCENDING OF DREAM TOWARD DESCRIPTION

In this portion of Lamantia's work we see a movement toward the world, a surpassing of the dream in the direction of description. This development, though, should not be thought a merely accidental one in the career of a particular writer. I would see it as indicating factors of more general significance. The theorists referred to in this chapter --Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Alphonso Lingis -- agree in seeing perception as a kind of demand or imperative that the world places upon us, an inevitable calling, perhaps an invasion of the human by what is external to it, the world. Thus the movement away from the highly rhetorical and dream-inflected mode and toward a more visual style might be seen not as a choosing of one style among others, but as a response to a soliciting pressure from without. Likewise the fashioning of this style is a further exploration of capacities latent in language use and linguistic experience. It is a singing of the world, to use Merleau-Ponty's expression, a recognition and an exploration intended to make these percepts accessible not to an isolated consciousness but to an array of participants in the collective adventure of language, to make them not only perceptible but in fact discussible and their representation discussible in an increasingly refined exercise of discrimination and mutual correction and adjustment.

Neither this stylistic development nor the deep response to perception which motivates it can be carried out alone by an isolated consciousness. They are both dependent upon social experience and interaction with other minds, other bodies, other selves at a range of levels -- the participation in a ritual, the witnessing of another's joy or wonder in the presence of nature, the comparison of one's own verbal formulations of these experiences with similar and different ones made by other writers at other times and in other places, and the further comparison of these responses with those of their readers, likewise at other times and places, or indeed perhaps in one's own time and place, in conversation or in the communal act -- unmentioned in this chapter, admittedly -- of the public reading. The world calls to us in the sense that it demands a response to the panorama it places before us, in which we ourselves are caught up, and of which we are living and active products. Yet it does not call to isolated and disembodied monads, rather to individuals in groups, to individuals in mental and physical associations with each other of various kinds and of varying durations and intensities who collectively and yet individually, individually and yet collectively, bring forth formalized responses to the imperative directed to their embodied being by the splendor of the light, the immemorial presence of the redwood trees, the elusive call of the birds.

Is there an ethical imperative here? We might think so if we reflect that the entirety of this process involves relatedness, searching out ways of inscribing into language, into writing, the relational nature of existence -- that is to say, the sheer fact of responding to the otherness of the world and the otherness of the foreign consciousness and the strange body which face me across the difference of space and of time. If to respond to what is other in ways that attempt to take account of its specific being is

ethical, then we might see an ethical development in such work and such a change of style. Certainly the tone and atmosphere of many of the poems and passages make one feel that the author thought of his project in similar terms. He attempts to do justice to a complex of relations and attempts also to convey their on-going though unrecognized importance: relations with aboriginal societies of the north American continent, with the natural world itself.

This is not to say of course that all artists and writers are obligated to undergo a similar change of style and for similar reasons, nor that the author in question would or should repudiate his earlier work. It only points to a possible response and to its ongoing validity. In this case, it is especially interesting to observe, because it takes place in the context of a body of work otherwise so different, so powerfully oriented to the exploration of a highly self-conscious style and to the mirroring and obscure correspondences experienced by the searching modern spirit in its sublime loneliness, ardent and persistent amid the refining fire of its desires and frustrations. Yet surrealism was never merely about this aspect of human experience. It sought the real in whatever form, and always by surpassing the received concept of it, the merely and conventionally given. Yet to surpass the given does not preclude the clear portrayal of direct experience as such. For the given that needs to be surpassed is much more the social construction of the world and of our concept of human experience and human possibility, rather than direct experience itself. In fact the given of the senses, properly framed and interrogated, may in fact be a strong starting point for the project of re-imagining human possibility within a given social context. And yet of course the worlds of the visual and of the social

are limiting as well. Do we not always feel this? We require, it seems, and always, an elsewhere, an otherwise, or at lest the glimmering promise of it.

NOTES

1 The phenomenological and indeed epistemological significance of light is explicated by Levinas in *Existence and Existents*: "…we can speak of vision and light wherever there is sensible or intellectual apprehension: we see the hardness of an object, the taste of a dish, the smell of a perfume, the sound of an instrument, the truth of a theorem. Light, whether it emanates from the sensible or from the intelligible sun, is since Plato said to be a condition for all beings. Thought, volition, sentiment…are first experience, intuition, clear vision or clarity seeking to come about…. Light makes possible, then, this enveloping of the exterior by the inward, which is the very structure of the cogito and of sense." [47-48]

2

3 The concept of the sociality of discourse we sketch out here is indebted in part to Bakhtin. See especially *The Dialogic Imagination*.

4 The idea of a "rendering" as opposed to a mere cursory mentioning is of course something we owe to Henry James. And yet it may be that all our descriptive attempts -- whether in writing or speaking -- carry with them much more richness and roundure (another Jamesian word) than we realize. It is their intersubjective origin -- as opposed to the genius of any individual -- that provides it. And yet of course, they tend to be laden with clichés; a fact which gives support to Deleuze's insistence that we live in a culture of clichés, and that the artist confronts not a pre-existing blank but rather a crowding of pre-esteblished images. Defeating the swarm of clichés is always partly an affair of perception – an immediate – perhaps very brief – glimpsing of the real. And yet models,

pre-existing expressions, must always play a role. Our opening description is, for example, a depiction of rain influenced by Francis Ponge.

5 The reader must not mistake our argument as proposing some sort of naïve correspondence between words and things.

In The Visible and the Invisible the Saussurian way of describing the vectors of signification in the field of language supplies Merleau-Ponty with new terms and a new model for describing the sensible field. Phenomenology of Perception showed everywhere that the perception of things is not an interpretation of signs, an ascribing meaning to terms. But de Saussure's structuralism convinced Merleau-Ponty that speaking is not either – that the meanings are not deposited in terms, but lie between them, in either oppositions. A useful overview and summary of recent research concerning the issue of language and sense experience is found in Horst Ruthrof's *The Body in Language*.

3 Breton to some extent dealt with the issue of the relation of Surrealism to direct perception in "Surrealist Situation of the Object." In *Manifestoes.*

4 *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Chiasm."

5 See Lingis, *The Community of those Who Have Nothing in Common*, 96-97.

CHAPTER FOUR ELSEWHERE: THE UNIQUE AND INCOMENSURABLE EXPERIENCE

So much of life consists of the generic. All the more reason then that the unique holds a peculiar attraction and allure. The singular effect, the unprecedented and unrepeatable event, the incommensurable and the incomparable are things which draw us beyond our ordinary range of experience. In this they also challenge our typical and received ideas, for in them we find the glimpse of an outside to the world we inhabit and the life we lead. Perhaps they are the very form of the utopian, since they create a surprise in whose after-echoes the world stands forth more clearly and with a sense of its unsuspected possibilities renewed. Things do not need to be just this way; they may be otherwise. In Surrealism, the classic formulation of this is found in those prose texts of Breton in which he formulates the enigmatic idea of the marvelous. In the First Manifesto he writes:

> The marvelous is not the same in every period of history: it partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us: they are the romantic ruins, the modern mannequin, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time…. They are Villon's gibbets, Racine's Greeks, Baudelaire's couches. [16]

And prior to this: "…the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful." [14] The marvelous is invoked, but it is never really defined. This is fortunate, for that would be to confine it within that definition. The issue, after all, is not one of using words correctly, and Breton, perhaps shrewdly, chose one of the emptiest and vaguest words in the language (his or ours) on which to ring his changes. And yet the marvelous, though not a concept, is perhaps one of our most basic

preoccupations, for in it we glimpse a transcendence that we seem to crave. A poem which marks the opening toward this beyond will attempt more than any other to construct itself as a true singularity, to share as little of itself as possible with the realm of other texts, whether poetic or discursive, to be itself unique and incommensurable.

FORMS OF SINGULARITY: SIGN, FIGURE, VOICE

The volume *Ekstasis* contains a number of experiments in shaped verse, pieces which at times evidence a delicacy and accuracy of cadence that bears comparison with Herbert, quite apart from their devotional content. The poem "Christ" is one such, a piece which through its shaped format overtly strives for an usual degree of specificity as a verbal artifact.

["CHRIST"]

The work is apocalyptic in content, cryptic in its phrasing and imagery and, clearly, unusual in format, attempting to place us in relation to its unique subject by being itself unique in form. This is done with fragmented syntax and a bold experimentation with typography. The result is a special combination of traditional religious vision (of an apocalyptic kind) and a remarkable inventiveness within the limits the orthodox subject matter establishes, as though an experimental film were to be projected on a Doric column or indeed on a crucifix. It is an effect seen in other examples of modern Catholic art such as Dali's crucifixion painting, poems by David Jones or, in contemporary

American writing, the plays of Erik Ehn, works which similarly combine orthodox Catholic subject matter with avant-garde style.

As the piece unfolds within its obvious constraints it yet seeks out within them an almost anarchic freedom, manifest in syntax, imagery, and word choice, and extending even to the visual dimension of typography. It is not possible to determine any method in the use of the typography, but it does convey, in its own immediate visual dimension, a perceptible array of *levels*, a range (in the musical sense) which the poet employs to convey pure intensities.[1]They are not psychological intensities. There is no sense in which we are to understand a word in bold caps as receiving some special emotional emphasis. In addition, the eschatological subject matter places the poem beyond the dimension of individual affect. It is rather an account of the human soul facing and responding to that which faces it by definition, its creator. In this context the rest of the universe becomes irrelevant and so dissolves in a phantasmagoria of passing images. Rather than being the signature eccentricities of an individual, the experiments with type face and format are the musical notations of a voicing of this limit experience, which is yet unvoicable and inexpressible. The pure intensities of voice as such are the medium by which the soul acknowledges the duplicity of signs, the fact that signs may be understood as either vehicles for meaning in a context or as singularities and focal points of intensity in Lyotard's sense [*Libidinal Economy* 16-20]; yet in the eschatological context, the meaning of signs becomes less and less important, since the world to which they refer is being superceded. They may nonetheless retain their function of conveying a pure affective import which the soul requires to express its condition, though yet this has nothing to do with individual psychology or autobiography. This in fact lies at the very

root of religious observance and ritual. In an otherworldly religion, the signs of the world are the signs of a transient spectacle, and therefore of limited significance. And yet as a soul, as a subject, a believer and a communicant, I must attend to them in an effort to know what lies beyond them, for they are the images and shadows of divine things. In so far as I do this, I will be moved to prayer and to ecstatic expression, for the soul must exist in relation to what it knows, and its only possible response to the divine is an ecstatic one. In this response it has at its disposal only a pure emanation of itself which in art can be *marked* and not really represented, and in fact in no way represented, by material objects -- by things drawn from the world and converted by this selection into signs, the signs of the world now made to serve a foreign purpose, to point away from it and beyond themselves in an analogical movement which is the expression of this soul (and yet by definition of any). Hence the formalized tendency of all religious art, borne of its necessary anonymity and also of its non-mimetic character, since what it reaches toward cannot be represented, and likewise that which reaches cannot really be either. It is only the dynamic of reaching itself which constitutes the subject and substance of the work, which exists as though by a pure analogy, in which the terms related -- soul and creator -- are yet unrepresentable and, in a sense, unknown. The visual shaping of this poem is a minor example of such practice -- simultaneously personal and anonymous, formal and yet ecstatic, and anything but psychological, for the freedom taken is not that of a person but of an eschatological situation, since the approach of the apocalypse creates a liberation of signs, indeed an anarchy of signs, which the poet makes use of in the unusual disposition of his language.

There is a challenging animation to the text when first read, an almost jazz-like unevenness of rhythm in the phrases, which vary greatly in length and grammatical form. Its music is deliberately bold, and in a sense discordant, for it attempts to signal the end of a world, of an order; harmony, therefore, would be out of place, as it likewise would in those musical compositions which attempt to convey apocalyptic disruption. If the work attempts to be musical in this broader sense it is also, in another way, an illustrated work, attempting to make itself its own illustration, to provide itself with its own picturing. Yet in attempting to do this, it also approaches and tests the limits of language, limits which become strained to the breaking point -- as they do repeatedly Lamantia's poetry -- in this effort to convey a prophetic gnosis signaling the end of days. As a result language must make an approach to these other means, these other arts outside its own province. It therefore approaches the condition of music in an ecstatic and mystical utterance and manifests this in the disjunctiveness we find in other modern works which attempt a similar revelation. Yet in addition, this musical impulse is combined with another impulse -- toward the illustrated: two impulses of poetry, therefore, by which it tests its limits but which are normally exclusive of each other as tending in opposite directions. The impulse toward visual figuring coexists uneasily with a rhythmic urgency which continually threatens to disrupt it, and this ecstatic impulse is in its turn constrained by the figural inclination which limits it and which marks its limit at, quite literally, the outer boundary of the poem, which is yet itself the determining condition of a shapeliness, of a mute picture. A musical language and a silent image jostle each other in this unusual piece where poetry attempts to surpass itself in both directions at once.

Indeed our very distance from the *doctrine* of the piece makes us all the more aware of it as a formal construction. Yet in presenting us with such constructions, expressing sentiments and ideas which most readers cannot identify with, the artist gives us the opportunity to move outside our more typical experience of poetry, where it is in most cases pursuing lines of argument and valuation with which we either agree or disagree, but which, in either case, we can take within the ongoing conversation which is our social and political existence. But in the case of religious art, or of religious art from a foreign culture, we behold a content with which most of us neither agree nor disagree, a content which therefore annuls itself and reveals the formal qualities of the work all the more clearly, and in which we are perhaps subjected to a kind of alienation effect in the process. Hearing for the first time notes in these words tumbling after each other, in these excited and uneven rhythms, a novelty which blossoms into a singular impression and then into an expressive import; seeing, likewise, notes the images presented as they are manifest not as a mere assemblage but as a visionary cinema of apocalyptic imagery. At such moments the sheer strangeness of artistic expression is revealed, a unique event which momentarily takes place within us.

Two slighter pieces complement this work, though indeed the entire volume warrants close attention. The first is a delicate and avowedly devotional poem.

["WHAT GIFT TO BRING..."]

This is an exquisite example of the shaped poem as a kind of drawing with words. Its tone and movement are much less agitated than the previous piece, and its quiet passage creates not merely a figure on the page but a rhythmic shaping and contouring of what is in this case pure prayer. Perhaps because it is, we are also shown the process of meaning-creation in a virtually pure form, unattached to practical or worldly considerations. We are given, first, a marking out of the process by which we follow the track of a developing significance, drawn on by it and yet creating it as we go, participating in its temporal prolongation. Our attention is suspended between ear and eye, and both are given equal weight, so that there is an exemplary equilibrium of faculties: the ear hears the voice of the poet, a silent voice speaking its harmoniously eloquent sentences, as the eye, disrupted in its habits by the shaped stanza, has the experience of searching out the syntax, searching *for* and *through* the utterance instead of merely receiving it, as is the case with ordinary reading. The experience of voice and voicing by language and in writing predominates perhaps by only the duration of a beat over the seeing and comprehensive action of the eye. My experience of language split in this way, and somewhat delayed within itself, hovers expectantly, searchingly, over the written marks which are no longer mere transparent and invisible carriers. This hesitant expectancy is appropriate for a religious poem: I experience the advent of meaning, and yet its ongoing presence even in its passage and fading and the continual expectancy which this creates, its extension through time and for the duration of my reading. I experience likewise and at the same time the illusory appearance of voice as such, called forth by the rhythms and syntax of these formal signs, these word. This effect of voice and of significance is nothing other than a singularity coalescing within me and yet

carrying me forward in time, a time I am now more clearly and precisely aware of given the versification's slow precision of movement, a time comprising what is quite simply my life, within which I feel this advent of another and this voice of another, which is yet neither my own nor anyone else's, bearing foreign sentiments and alien meanings. The mystery of writing itself comes forth here, its capacity to capture a sense of the human presence in its uniqueness and in its paradoxical presence and absence, (just as it can of the visible world in its), for there is not a single person here, and hardly a person at all, but rather a crossing of relationships -- intentional, temporal, inter- and intra-personal. Writing somehow transcends or exceeds itself, its condition as mere inscription. In a self-consciously shaped poem of this kind, one yet given over to the religious experience of *vocation*, we become especially aware of this. In its grace and shapeliness, in its purity as unworldly utterance, it causes us to renew our experience of the poetic in one of its essential manifestations, as an art of number, to use Valery's phrase, or, specifically, the art which creates meaning by subjecting it to number, and this by means of an anonymous voice or voicing hovering over, within, and around itself in its own proximity, in the continual self-presence and self-deferral of a virtual subjectivity.

The experience of voice and call is also the occasion of "In a Grove," the most playfully constructed of these poems in a manner which recalls Apollinaire.

["IN A GROVE"]

I have to confess the poet might have been a little too playful here, for I don't think I can really say what shape this is. "Christ" was obviously a cross and "What gift..." a church

or perhaps a ciborium. Is this piece a tree? A flower? A megaphone? An old fashioned victrola? (We might almost see the dog -- made of words, of course -- sitting before it, waiting to here his master's voice). At the heart of the flower-megaphone-victrola the word "voice," in upper case, has been made into a pointed shape like a delta or an arrowhead. The position and the shape on the page point to a center which is not actually there. It is nearly there, or near there, and yet not quite. In this sense it is like the experience of voice itself which has a kind of center or which seems to be always indicating a possible center, as an absolutely present meaning, as likewise a clearly present now, but which yet blossoms and diffuses around me and seems thus to disperse that present and that presence, extending as it does an implicit significance both backward and forward in time and also outward in space. This spatial dimension in particular is a new element, a dimension of meaning we might add to our investigations, to complement the temporal one of "What gift..." and the semiotic one of "Christ".

The poem is a slight piece, almost jocular. Yet it's very playfulness, by being slightly confusing, causes one to step back for a moment and to consider its underlying subject. And yet, what is this subject? We might say that it is an experience of call and therefore of vocation, as "What gift..." was. Yet it is more secular in spirit. In addition, we must note that there is a more specific theme of place brought forward.

My experience of voice is always an experience of context, one in which I participate in the construction of meaning, the meaning (among other things) of the situation itself. The meaning of the encounter, as an interpersonal meeting and facing, is delivered to me in the voice and in the relation to that speaker which I am prompted to adopt, and yet it is something whose ongoing development I track -- granting and

withholding assent, summoning and relaxing contestation, in a moment by moment process. Yet even as I am drawn into this bipolar relation, a second dimension opens up around the periphery of that, a kind of mapping consisting of pasts and of futures, "heres" and "yonders." [2] It is a mapping, containing both time and space, as well as implied actions and implied relations with the speaker and with others: it thus also implies an interaction with other purposes and with other valuations, and it contains implicitly and becomes more and more explicitly a kind of theatre, one in which we gradually find ourselves at center stage. In this sense all interactions have an inherent dramaturgy: are you entering or exiting? Are you protagonist or antagonist? Is this a comedy or a tragedy? Will there be a reversal in this scene? This becoming-theatre, however, is not a state; it is a process. It arises not all at once but is approached gradually. The theatre takes shape around us, either quickly or slowly, as we speak, but it is not present suddenly or from the first. It is summoned to its fullest existence by the voice and by its spoken directives, not by the mere gaze, nor by the face, nor indeed by the simple presence of the other. As in all theatre, it poses the fundamental questions: Where are we? Who are we? What will become of us, of them? And these are, of course, the fundamental questions of ethics, as likewise of metaphysics, and of politics.

And before this...what? We notice a vaguer context of expectations which yet has a peculiar quality of attentiveness and of alertness: my life is placed in a new light for me by this encounter and by this voiced interaction with the other, an interaction which in its voiced quality solicits both my mind and my body and subtly changes the disposition and tonus of each. In the poem, the speaker undergoes this moment. In fact there is no other person present at all, so that his experience is of voice as such, of call as such. It is not

necessarily religious, as the two previous poems were, but it points to what we might consider the basis of all religions, of all visionary experience, including Surrealism and Romanticism, as well as of all radical politics. It points to the experience of being summoned to an *elsewhere*, an elsewhere which yet is not a place but a dimension, a reserve of unacknowledged and yet potential experience, of unacknowledged awareness, and thus a source of potential new meanings. The elsewhere is a process of meaning-creation as this exists at the outer edge of known and familiar meanings, known and familiar social practices. It may include the experience of contestation and polemic, which Romanticism certainly did, and which revolutionary politics always does, but it must have as its basis and as its inaugural moment the experience of being summoned by an opening, a crack in the white wall of received interpretations and typical dispositions. What is this experience if not a hearing? What is a hearing, a hearkening, to use a Heideggerian expression, if not a noticing? To notice is an ordinary and humble expression, yet revelation is misunderstood if it is always thought of as something stupendous. The poem, like certain pieces by Frost, is a light and graceful handling of what is yet a profound theme -- the attunement of the ear, and beyond that of the mind, toward the fact of Being as such. This takes the form of a sudden hearkening, a discovery by means of the ear and that peculiarly intimate attentiveness which the ear alone is capable of, and it produces an awareness of new possibilities within experience which are felt very concretely, and indeed physically, as a kind of stirring awake, a restless becoming which begins to germinate within the speaker in an excess of energy and a opening outward of delight, causing him to playfully disport himself even with the very

shapes and typography of his language. By these means he is directed to an “elsewhere” not in any of his particular aspects or capacities but in his totality.

In these poems we see emerge, gradually, the elusive sense of a human presence out of written inscription. And yet this presence does not proclaim and is not based upon any concept of definitive self-presence. It is rather a wavering between presence and absence, and is always in process: it is volatile, not fixed, diffuse and not locatable but rather cloudlike and uncertain, and it is virtual rather than real. As we read, we witness the birth of meaning out of language and, in addition, of a more-than-linguistic sense out of an improvised technique of typographical signs, and then in the next piece the tensions and resolutions of a voiced presence out of the rhythms and durations of ordinary sentences, and finally the feeling of situated personhood from these two elements together. In all cases it is as if an analogy between incommensurables mysteriously befalls us: between arbitrary mark and sense, words and voice, sentence and vocative presence, language as such and a dramatic encounter involving persons not literally present and unstated --and indeed unknown -- ethical and political meanings.

And yet the stupendous does exist, and for most people it is the experience of love.

THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

The boat tilts on your image on the waves between a fire of foam and the flower of moon rays, these flags of your dreaming lips. I'm watching Venus on the ogred sky and a continent in cocoons.

Soon all the butterflies of desire shall manifest o presience of life becoming poetic...and poetry the incense of the dream. A street and a forest interchange their clothing, *that* tree of telephones, *this* television of nuts and berries – the air edible music.

King Analogue
Queen Image
Prince Liberty...
...Garden of imperious images, life is a poem someday to be lived: the feast of our hearts on fire, the nerves supplying spice, blood coursing a glow of insects, our eyes the dahlias of torrential ignition.

The whisper of the inter-voice to wrap you in the mantle of marvelous power, with the secret protection of the forest that falls asleep in fire whose ores become transmined only for love – all your steps will lead to the inner sanctum none but you behold, your shadow putting on the body of metaphoric light.

The stone I have tossed into the air of chance shall come to you one great day and exfoliate the original scarab, the carbuncle of delights, the pomegranate inviolate, the sonorous handkerchief of the Comte de Saint-Germain, all the reinvented perfumes of ancient Egypt, the map of the earth in the Age of Libra when the air shall distribute our foods, the sempiternal spectrum of sundown at Segovia (the stork carrying the golden egg from the Templar's tower) Chief Seattle's lost medicine pouch, our simultaneous presence in all the capitals of Europe while traveling Asia and listening to the million-throated choir of tropical birds, your lost candlewax empire, a madrone forest to live inside of, which we can wrap up in a set of "secret bags" and open on our wanderlust, the turbulent cry beneath the oceans, the extinct bird calls in a magical vessel Christian Rosenkreutz dropped on his way out of Damcar, beads of coral dissolving the last motors, the redolent

> eyes of first born seers, the key to the bank of sanity, the ship of honey at the height of storms through which we sail to new islands rising from the sunken continents and the bridge between sleep and waking we will traverse in constant possession of "the great secret" become transparent as a tear drop – *with no other work but the genius of present life.*

The poem opens with an image of the Beloved in a boat, a traditional Romantic and Symbolist *topos*. In her slumber she appears as a kind of ship's figurehead reflected on the waves. We are presented with what seems a semi-allegorical frieze: a dreaming woman in a boat and a marine landscape divided between the sun in its flamboyant setting and the rising moon with Venus attendant. A difficult phrase, "a continent in cocoons" could be interpreted as the shoreline obscured by clouds or perhaps by night itself. In any event, in the next paragraph the cocoons bring forth the butterflies of desire. Desire, we are told, shall manifest, that is, will show itself as something which, though previously dismissed as inconsequential, is now to enjoy a reality substantial enough to bring about a transformation of the world. The exclamation "O prescience of life becoming poetic" is addressed to the initial scene itself, and thus to the fortuitous moment. It is the appearance of the Beloved just then, the disposition of the elements just so, which brings the possibility of transformation into the speaker's awareness. Given the right circumstances and the fact of beauty as a kind of lure, the idea of a radical transformation of life seems credible and in fact very near. The excitement of this apprehension moves into the poem as a rapt and ecstatic tone opens up within it. Indeed the landscape itself is changed, steadily transformed with the coming of night and the moon of the imagination. Yet though this gathering perception is the poem's occasion and prompts the speaker's heightened vision, the poem itself is not one more celebration

of poetry nor even of art in general. It is life itself which will be transformed, turned into the condition of poetry, that is, made as completely responsive to our desires as it is possible to imagine, given the fundamental realities of physical existence. The transformation he envisions is therefore political. Poetry will accompany this transformation and perhaps prompt it, inspire it, just as the speaker is inspired by the presence of the Beloved and the beauty of the scene, yet it still must take place in the world amid the unavowable community of lovers which yet is and must be completely real, although now, admittedly, it finds itself trapped amid the negative community of money, commerce and capital, and, in fact, what we might call the economic as such. [3]

The poem, as befits a radical document, is not without humor nor in fact a certain element of satire, which yet does not endanger its rapt and deeply Romantic tone. In this respect it is completely Shelleyan, as so much of Lamantia is. Yet it is a radical work nonetheless, since it implicitly seeks to overturn the basis of our current social organization by proposing a change in its underlying concept, for it implies the priority of the analogical vision over the economic one. This is done in an oblique manner and with a genial humor which rises to an elevated and enthusiastic utterance (using the word in its 18th century sense) only to a degree and never in such a way as to impair the tone of intimate confidence, rapt seduction, and visionary ardor which yet in its warmth and in its atmosphere of a nearly coterie seclusion is far from any strident militancy. It is as if the poet speaks from a standpoint somewhat outside of life and outside the world, to which he supplies now, to his friends and to certain initiates, an alternative map and an unexpected description, one based upon a different vision than what he knows currently obtains and one which must remain closed to the uninitiated. There is, therefore, in

addition to Shelleyan echoes, perhaps a discrete reminiscence of various Platonic dialogues, with the *Symposium* coming first to mind.

Of course, the idea of a contrast and a conflict between the economic and the analogical is not original with Lamantia. We recall that this was in fact a preoccupation crucial to Breton, whose great prose works, as Anna Balakian points out, are all attempts to create an analogical means of understanding reality. [4] It is, quite simply, the means by which one learns to see the world from an alternative perspective both familiar to us and yet also foreign and becoming perhaps more deeply foreign all the time. Normally we see it as an economic system, whether this be understood in terms of traditional political economy or in Bataille's extended sense. This economic vision regards everything in terms of a common denominator -- money, labor, or in Bataille's conception, a fundamental energy of life based ultimately in solar radiation. It thinks always in terms of equivalent exchanges. When there is no equivalence, debt or surplus results. All of earthly existence, in fact, is seen as being governed by this weighing and measuring. Yet analogical thinking refuses this, and sees the world in terms of presences. The presences of the world, the things of the world -- both smaller things and larger encompassing presences, its furniture, to use a medieval term -- are irreducibles, bearing complex and unsuspected relations among themselves; even their names, at times, are thought to be significant. The power of the analogy liberates the associations of images (and words), as likewise in alchemy it was supposed to liberate the associative potential of the elements. As we saw in the previous chapter, these presences beckon to us and demand to be seen, to be responded to, yet in their demand, the imperative they lay upon us, they also lure us to a more generous and enlarged existence, charged with vitality and

free of calculation. They thus open the pathway to creativity, if not to practical effectiveness. King analogue, Queen image, and Prince liberty create a kind of dialectic: the analogical gives rise to images in endless supply and in surprising combinations: because they are based in analogy, these flights of images are in a sense grounded and not merely chaotic, despite what might sometimes seem to be the case. They rather arise out of our intuitive response to fundamental realities, which we might think of as dignities (to use a Kantian term): sun and woman, moon and sea and night, fire, sleep, and snow. And yet because this grounding is analogical and not merely logical, a narrow and predictable pattern of thinking, a conventional meaning and a mere rationalism or calculation -- all of which have many ways of disguising themselves -- can perhaps be avoided with luck. (And luck is always necessary -- the aleatoric is itself a soliciting and liberating power, summoning its own secrets and gods, as so many musicians know better than anyone). These grounded and yet free associations create a freedom of thought, of conception and imagination, which can be a liberating force. The analogical is thus placed in implicit opposition to the thinking characteristic of the economic, which is by definition the thought of quantity and exchange, whether of matter, money, energy, or any other supposed universal substrate.

I take this to be the background for this remarkable poem. It is a vivacious piece, presented as though spoken to another and not as a private utterance. As a love poem per se it might appear to be somewhat rhetorical. Yet, and again we see another parallel with Shelley, in addition to being a love poem it is very much a poem of a small group, a band apart, which has as its means of cohesion some special and distinguishing knowledge. It partakes very much, therefore, of the performative rhetoric of demonstration and attempts

to show what this state of delight and enthusiasm, this enlarged existence devoted to the enjoyment of life and the inspiration of art would actually be like. The poet demonstrates this for his friends and not merely for the Beloved, and also of course for us. *By their voice you shall know them*, one might almost think, for by one's voice and through one's voice, the tone and tenor of one's existence is intuited by the others around one, and it is by this means that one reveals the inner and concrete music that animates one's existence. The poet, therefore, abandons imagery addressed to the eye; it slowly fades from the poem as light drops beneath the horizon. There is only his voice left, giving proof of his inspiration in a tone at once intimate and public, bearing the marks of that peculiar and very European stamp of publicly avowed passion, the *demonstration* which we observed at the very outset of this study. It is a voice and a rhythm which are intended to be a lure, and for all its rhetoric a seduction. The seduction is directed not merely to the Beloved and certainly not to the group, which we might imagine somewhere in the shadows, inhabiting their own *elsewheres* not too far away -- far enough for privacy, close enough to remain connected, as one imagines in reading Shelley's series of poems to Jane; rather, it is a seduction directed to the reader. Yet the art of seduction consists in rendering the other person weaker by their own choice and in persuading them to give up defense. It is, therefore, our resistance to this very idea of placing the economic vision aside which is implicitly addressed. This defensiveness which we might have, which we do in fact have, and which we must have, given our ideological conditioning, is itself based on the idea of exchange, on a continual calculation on our part of rates of exchange and value, an entire stock market in the head which has been implanted in us from our earliest experience and which we take to be normal and legitimize with terms such as common sense, good

sense, and the like. Therefore, when confronted with a vision such as that presented here, Economic Man or Woman asks, How will I prevail if I stop counting and tallying? And yet if this idea is abandoned, what will replace it? Quite simply, the idea of sharing. We will share ourselves with each other, the earth itself with each other and with all the others, and the earth (somehow) will share itself with us. There is thus a communal ethic that burgeons beneath the poem's surface in a kind of limitless generosity -- the language itself nearly sheds the rule of logos and makes due with only the non-hierarchical syntax of listing and naming. In this way it embodies a minimum of regulation and ordering and a maximum of giving, of *donation*, as thing follows thing in an endless chain, and these things -- each unique, each singular -- become increasingly distant, increasingly rich and strange, indeed increasingly outlandish. The entire world shall be given to us in an ongoing profusion of associations in which language, once again, seems to bubble up into laughter, into a weightless and inebriated celebration of living and of the adventure of living among unique and irreplaceable existents shared with uniquely precious and irreplaceable others.

Yet though there is this strong social dimension to the poem, there is still a space for inwardness. The poem's communal vision does not militate against that, and the piece is remarkable for preserving a sense of privacy, despite its rhetoric. This is perhaps its distinctively American dimension. We might recall that in Levinas the Beloved is virginal and inviolate in her very nature. A perception similar to this seems to animate the fourth paragraph, which takes the form of a prayer for the Beloved, for her perfect fulfillment and integrity, for her privacy seen as an immunity to all possible violation. The shadow clothed with the body of metaphoric light is itself a metaphor for the soul,

which participates in the external, the light of the world, and yet only at a remove, the remove of language and imagination, the metaphoric light itself. The freedom from violation is thus absolute, or at least it is so in the optative mood of the prayer (and, of course, the whole poem occurs in this mood). It is an immunity which she will in some way share with nature itself and is thus a sovereign and absolute immunity. Here her radical freedom and otherness are acknowledged and affirmed as values to be preserved. She remains a lambent presence, like the coals of the forest which are the paragraph's central and luminous image, spreading her soft light like a nimbus, an aura. The analogical vision is ultimately one of communication across distances and across individuals and natural kinds; this includes individuals among themselves, humans as a whole with the natural environment they share, and finally man and woman with each other as they participate in and enlarge each other's lives through physical proximity as well as through imagination and language.

VISION, CHANGE, AND PROMISE

The analogical allows disparate things to be brought into connection with each other and distant things to communicate, perhaps by means of an unsuspected agency, an action-at-a-distance. Yet at the same time it allows the imagination to move rapidly and unpredictably within a given context, creating unique events out of typical experiences. In the process, unsuspected dimensions open within these experiences, these occasions. In this piece "She Speaks the Morning's Filligree," which has something of the character

of a stylistic exercise, although a rich and complex one, we see the dynamics of this process.

It is interesting to compare this poem, with its more-than-baroque language and imagistic concretions, with different pieces by Hart Crane. "The Harbor Dawn" perhaps suggests itself, because of the shared conceit of waking beside the Beloved. Yet Lamantia's piece, like many of his love poems, moves away from the genre of love poetry more narrowly defined into a poetry of metaphysical and more-than-rational apprehension. For this reason a comparison with the "Voyages" or at least with moments in that series might be more appropriate. Significantly, both poets begin by invoking youth. In Lamantia:

> *Beneath him, earth's breath*
> *risen from inward wars of blood:*
> *the youth's vision*
> *is a vibrant string plucked by the gods*
> *over the field of stars.*

Through the night on fire with my blood
whose incense sputters your sleep and washes you
on the threshold caught from the Tinging Stone
I'm tired of cooking the ultimate specter of future poems
weak from demands of the mooneating children of the 25th Century
it's really so late to proclaim my youth of a hundred years!

But you, Io,
walking on sandals of almond & wrapped by hair of eglantine,
open the seashell that sings us back through storms of smoke
to the burnt altars of childhood that float
in milk I drew from dragons slain with the help of the sylph:
Clocks rant their dirges of woe to no avail!

Your sleep is my awakening
All the shadows lie cancelled by celestial foam
Moon-poisons are cooked to the perfection of Tea
The sun stirs the cauldron Sothis fixes from your tears
that dance as diamonds on opalescent hands breaking the Seven Seals!

Over & over the dusk of the Chant from the plain of Segovia
Rings up the veil through which the deities move prisms of desire:
The cup that swallows the sword, the wands that shake the stars!

Aurora the cat of the morning
has sent a message of aerial fire
to the twelve-faced Aerolith whose name is not permitted for reading
whose number is water & abyss of the bone
whose age is always about to become and
has always been no less than time

We can play host to the marvelous
and have it burn us to the salt of memory
where an invisible stone contracts all thought
to draw out the words
that shall crackle your sleep
to wake us up beyond the Pleiades…

We recall the wonderful opening of *Voyages* I, the Heraclitean vision of the child by the shore. Admittedly Lamantia's passage does not have the visual acuity of Crane's, yet the absence of this gives him a certain conceptual freedom. His opening echoes slightly Blake's starry floor and watery shore: a plain of conception is announced at the outset which places us in relation to ultimate considerations. It is not precisely eschatological, for the perspective is toward this life and toward the possibilities still latent in it. Yet it is seen from the standpoint of an ultimate. It will not do to say from the standpoint of eternity, for the writing (of both poets) is drenched in the element of time, as it is too in the elements themselves -- in the sea and in light. Yet an ultimate perspective seeks fundamental apprehensions; it is a gnosis which sees beyond the typical and the mundane, and it reserves the right to change perspective drastically and in baroque fashion: zooming in toward minutia at one moment, expanding to a cosmic dilation the next, placing itself as though at a point above ordinary experience, looking down upon it, judging it perhaps, and in so doing arrogating to itself the tones of

prophecy and the breadth of metaphysics or religion, all bathed in the imagery of light, the Apollonian dispensations of knowledge, prophecy, and judgment; and then, conversely, in abrupt reversal it will sink itself into the depths of matter, into the fluxes of the libidinal body and the obscurity of the sea. We see in this way that the power possessed by such work -- whether Crane's or Lamantia's, or indeed that of other poets who have enriched this tradition -- Blake himself, Shelley, Breton, Hugo -- is that of the analogical matrix quite simply, exhibited as though in a pure exercise and in an ideal freedom, which alone could allow such sudden movement from the apparent to the occult or from the immediate experience, however rapturous and ecstatic, to the more considered illumination of gnosis. One sees in both these pieces -- the one admittedly much larger and more ambitious than the other -- a comparable intensity of impulse and a comparable scale of expressive ambition which is embodied in this very oscillation along the continuum of nearest to farthest, smallest to greatest, apparent and immediate to unapparent, hidden, or transcendent.

Perhaps we might say that it was Crane's ambition to forge a language of intensities beyond the psychological, which yet maintains within itself a certain vocative force and imperative dimension, retaining by this means, if by no other, a connection to the idea of a single subject of enunciation, a voice at once rapt, strident, and prophetic, in a way not dissimilar to Mayakovsky, and therefore based in a single visionary apprehension and a single and remarkably unified rhythmic breath, albeit diversified, broken open and broken across the six sections of the poem, moving thus through various key changes and seeming to pick itself up *in medias res* a number of times and perhaps each time. Yet all is governed by the idea of the devotee consumed and destroyed by his

own devotion and by the savage goddess who is its object. We saw a very similar stance in Lamantia's poem "A Winter Day," yet here by contrast he adopts a different approach, one somewhat less centered in a relative coherence of implied narrative, but instead more open to the dispersal of metaphoric play. His lines admittedly have a lesser share of Crane's tremendous sonority, and perhaps this is because he is less concerned with the fate of the self as such, with assessing the disasters of its earthly career in the face of elemental and metaphysical presences. He is concerned rather with marking out the dimension of ultimate significance within which that self must be imagined and lived and within which it pursues its fate. Such marking requires an ultimate expansion of the descriptive capacity beyond the presentation of physical resemblance and appearances. He must instead use king analogue and queen image in a fluid and swiftly changing process, in a cinema of metaphors implying many different perspectives which shift continually: dawn appears with the stealth and silence of a cat, and yet in the next line it is a messenger, perhaps the imperial messenger we know from Kafka's parable, an envoy from the beyond who yet reveals our condition to us in a secret moment. And yet this message is sent to the twelve-faced aeorlith -- an image which fuses the Book of Revelation with Stanly Kubrik's *Space Odyssey*, an aerolith being, of course, a floating stone. And yet this floating stone is the earth itself, though yet it is also the poet in his singular condition and vocation. Dawn which is a silent and stealthy animal which is an imperial message and messenger which is fire and light comes to earth which is a floating stone and also the "I" and eye of our rapt and blinded seer, the earthly guest, both of whom -- earth and the gnostic seer it harbors -- are yet anonymous entities and in a sense unknowns: the one in the mode of the stranger, the visitor from elsewhere, the alien and

the spy, and the other in the manner of the primordial unknown, for we do not know the earth as a whole, nor is it ever revealed to us as an emergent totality from the sum of perspectives serially revealed as we move, in whatever fashion across its face, as we encounter in whatever way its various facets. Because both seer and seen are unknowns in this sense, both must be the subjects of a more-than-rational description empowered by the analogy and in principle without limit or ultimate goal, ultimate *adaequatio* of thing and description. There is, and always must be, a surplus left over, a something or a somewhat unaccounted for. In this margin there is the basis of an ultimate freedom, the freedom from definitive description. There is a perpetual earliness, therefore, held out to both the seer in his wonder and to the earth itself as it suffers continual definition, and hence abuse, at the hands of those others, the unmindful, who cannot own it but who can never give up trying.

It is not accidental, therefore, that both poets in announcing the fact that their imaginative intentions will be stretched to an ultimate ambition do so at the very outset with the signal motif of youth. The analogical here is a power of renewal, a reserve of continual youth and an ongoing promise, precisely by this means of exceeding definitive description. A swiftly changing imaginative conceptualizing is trained upon elemental experience itself -- the moment of waking, the experience of light, the beholding of the Other, the Beloved, and the earth, and it yields a dawning apprehension of possibilities active once more and stirring within the openness of the world: “we can play host to the marvelous....” We realize that the renovation of life is to be found in every moment, if that moment is seen in the right way, and in enough ways, for no one way will do. Its substance is already there, available in the freedom assured by the natural exceeding of

any given description and hence the inevitable defeat of any imposed orthodoxy. We might say that the stuff of revolution is found when the body is seen naked against the light of the sun and when we know that no single view shows either the body or the sun in its entirety, that as a result this body and the mind which is part of it harbor always hidden powers, whether physical or imaginative, and that it is in this sense that we do not know what it can do nor even, in a way, what it is.

THE IRRATIONAL/THE INEXPLICABLE

Reason approaches a limit condition in surrealist writing repeatedly. In the poems we have been examining we see peculiar examples of this; while not marked by the dissenting and exasperated passions of the dark and tormented work and lacking, too, the arresting theme of the erotic, they yet have their own special daring. They are poems in which reason itself, as opposed to the emotions, presses against its outward boundary, attempting to breach the narrow partition which divides the known from the unknown while recognizing itself as limited not only by a given regime but also by the economic as such and indeed by time and the physical limitations of human life. Still, it persists and in fact proposes a utopian elsewhere, which it occasionally glimpses. Perhaps this is why these poems take the form of unique moments. Reason, in so far as it is reason and not madness, can make these leaps into the void only once or only on occasion.

Yet every regime seeks to rationalize itself, to present its orderings as though they were part of the order of nature and its rationalizations as though they were rationality as

such. The irrational, therefore, is a decisive break not only in the economy of the individual but in the economy in which he or she finds himself or herself ordered in the grids of subject formation and power relations. There might still be times when one glimpses the basis of a fundamental and perhaps savage freedom. Predictably, such experiences are not necessarily comforting.

THE OWL

I hear him, see him – interpenetrate
Those shadows warping the garden pathways,
As the dark steps I climb are lit up
By his Eye magnetic to the moon,
His eye magnetic to the moon.

I have not seen him when windows are mute
To whisper his name; on that moment
Erroneous bats slip out through the sky.
His lair conceives my heart,
All hearts make the triangle he uses for a nose,
Sniffing bloodways to my brain:
The bloodways are lit up by his Eye.

On a sudden appearance he tortures leaves,
Flays branches and divides segments
The sun has drawn. I do not falter
-- in the dark he fortifies.
His color is *green* green,
To distend him over the earth.
He does not fly.
You meet him while walking.

He is not easily enticed to manifestation,
But stony silence, petrified moments
-- a transfiguration – will bring him out,
focused on the screen where all transfigured bodies are.
You must be humble to his fangs

That paw the moonball dissolving in the space
From the corner of your eye:
He will trick you otherwise
-- into daylight, where you meet his double while running.

By night, the deltas of the moon-spilled planet
Are stoned under his wriggling light.

By day, he chokes the sun.

This remarkable poem is fittingly unique among Lamantia's works in its concentration on a single figure, the owl of the title. And yet this owl is unlike any real one, certainly. The poem would appear to be a nightmare piece, similar in some respects to other nightmare poems going back to Coleridge's *Cristabel*. I might adduce as well "A Valentine" by the little-known American surrealist David Schubert, and perhaps certain pieces by the contemporary Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelof. More relevant precursors might be some of Eluard's ballad-like pieces based upon fragments of folk tales. At any rate, Lamantia's poem does seem to be part of this broad generic universe I am attempting to sketch, what we might call the Romantic/Symbolist/Surrealist nightmare ballad. We notice a certain heraldic quality in the imagery, in the way the owl as a central figure is set against the ground of an enigmatic landscape. This landscape is strangely static and posed, and yet startling irruptions of energy -- usually light -- break through it at moments. In this way the piece incorporates the somewhat Manichean universe that fairy tales often exhibit -- fissures of total evil, harbors of safety, sudden and mysterious passageways linking the protagonist to other conditions in which one encounters enigmatic beings or abrupt illuminations. Such tales are texts of liminality per se, and thus of transformation or transgression. They are composed of border areas compacted into an obscure and

puzzling shape and are marked out with hidden thresholds extending in every direction and dimension, whose secret trajectories are the basis of the narrative machinery which is always coterminous with the landscape itself. In this piece, this motif of excursion to and across the border is related with a chanting rhythm and a nearly fixed stanza structure, including a very rare instance (for Lamantia) of refrain-like repetition. At the same time, these elements are used in an unpredictable way. The dream-like is always present, and yet it is restrained in a somewhat static and monochrome presentation. The piece is an etching rather than a cinema. And yet etchings are a traditional surrealist medium.

Owl and moon are associated in the first stanza and seem to dominate the entire night. The owl is a being of darkness who interpenetrates shadows, and is therefore almost always unseen, certainly never when he does not want to be. The owl is the master of the night itself; the bats are erroneous (a wonderful epithet for their erratic flight). Yet the owl in his stillness, is unerring. He does not think, and therefore does not err; he knows. But what does he know? He knows, among other things, the speaker, with whom he is connected by a mysterious affinity: "His lair conceives my heart/all hearts...brain" These are the most obscure lines of the poem. A singular moment governs each stage of the poem's journey: at this stage it is perhaps a moment of *election*.

There are others, however; the first is announced with the opening line; significantly it is a moment not of seeing but of hearing, and one imagines the startlement that only a sudden and unexpected noise can create. The second stanza, by contrast, is governed by an absence: he does not appear, and the windows do not show his reflection. Here the narrative moves toward the subjective, and the speaker becomes aware of the secret connection between himself and the elusive quarry which is also his hunter.

"Segments/ the sun has drawn" is an elegant metaphor for leaves and other vegetation. These segments of the world are the elements of biological existence itself. The owl parts them, severs them, and so he is himself only in part a natural being. Perhaps he transcends nature completely. At any rate, his appearance marks a break in its order, in its organic rhythms and continuity, and this despite the fact that his color is green. Actually, we are told that it is "*green* green" [author's italics]. This amusing distortion of idiom is the author's way of indicating a partially transcendent entity, one neither entirely of the natural order nor entirely beyond it. A light green or a dark green, a leaf green, pea green, grass green or sea foam green, are all instances of our attempt to match our language with the world, attempts which, as we saw in the previous chapter, are not in fact misguided, though these epithets are certainly primitive instances of that fundamental impulse. Rather *green* green is purely us, human language not ranged across any of the objects or events of the world but in relation only to itself. And yet it is green still, with all that implies of terrestrial origin and fate. The owl is thus a spirit of nature, ultimately, but the one peculiar to humans and to no other earthly creatures. He is the imagination in its purest form, and not subordinated to other ends or considerations. As both a properly human and natural power he fortifies in the dark, yet since one is not accustomed to pure imagination he is also disturbing. It is strange how foreign and uncanny the imagination actually is in its purity and in its freedom, and how threatening. For this reason it is often represented as a terrifying animal or as a human being possessed of, or by, demonic agencies, like the poet at the end of "Kubla Khan" who, having drunk the milk of paradise, appears as a fearful being of power with flashing eyes and floating hair. The owl is, moreover, demanding, and he requires humility, that is, a submission to one's

vocation. If this is not forthcoming, you can expect him to trick you. His trick is to hand you over to his demonic double who inhabits the day. Yet this double, whom you meet while running, that is, in the course of your busy day, is really a creature of the daylight world of reason in its normalized manifestations. He has really no connection with the dark owl of imagination but is a secret agent of the regime of rationalization, of economics and quantity. Perhaps that funny little pyramid with the eye in it on every dollar bill is *his* picture. Yet the real owl, the owl of darkness, transforms the image of the earth which in the moonlight, appears as an alien and elemental world of stone and water. It makes us realize that we are foreign to the world and perhaps to ourselves, and especially when we internalize the images and metaphors handed to us by the given regime. For these produce a false awareness which the owl comes to disturb or indeed to destroy. In "The Owl," therefore, we experience the strangeness of realizing that we always somewhat transcend any social order in which we find ourselves. And yet does this transcendence confer any special power? There is instead a sense of threat, of danger, of precariousness, in the piece as a whole. The excursion to the limit *is* dangerous. The owl, after all, is portrayed at the conclusion as choking the solar radiance of Apollonian reason and light. Therefore if the owl is a master, he is not a master one finds in any school or in any institutional context. He is rather more like one of Carlos Castaneda's *brujas*, perhaps Don Juan himself, and his lessons are as much tests as anything. What does one see, after all, in petrified moments of transfiguration? One sees oneself dead or worse than dead, inhabiting the death-in-life of semiotic subjection to either a received ideological construction or else to the free reign of signifiers which constitutes schizophrenia. There is a dialectic of necessity and danger. Approaching the limits of

what is safe for the mind, for the body, for the whole person, is necessary for a vision, for creativity. The poem is one of election if we understand election as the epochal meeting with the dark precursor of vision, the dangerous tutelary, a meeting we go to while yet being aware of its hazards. It is a poem, therefore, of fated risks one is bound to take given the nature of one's character and vocation. These risks, however, are not mere foolishness but are unique events in the development and definition of one's personhood.

DEPTHS OF EARTH AND TIME

As we read through Lamantia's work we begin to see in it a pervasive, and yet unforced, orientation to the ancient symbolism of the four elements. *Erotic Poems* are very much pieces of water and fire, the elements of Eros, of creativity, nascence and creative destruction; *Ekstasis* seems to ascend into a realm of light and air, as the poet attempts to sublime away, in the old alchemical sense, the contingencies of the body in the course of what is nonetheless an equivocal and anguished process, though one punctuated by moments of exultation. *Destroyed Works* is a book of the night, and of the night of earth, marked by obscure signs and crossed by portents; it descends through a gnostic vision of nature and the body, and carries with it shards and traces of history, as though they were pieces of wreckage. It is very much a book of earth, but of the fallen earth, the earth of primordial and yet ongoing catastrophe, both personal and political. *Blood of the Air*, as its title proclaims, is once again a book of the air, but in a fiery and explosive way. Its anarchic, bright and coruscating idiom attempts to create a resistance to the given and a resistance to the present; the first is its metaphysical and religious

dispensation, gnostic again, but in a more active and animated mode intended to awaken in us the idea of potentials unused and awaiting exploration; the second, the resistance to the present, is its political vision, an anarchism conveyed in codes and in riddling figures. *Becoming Visible* attempts a return to the earthly element and yet in a new way. It is the beginning of an ecological vision which is then developed more fully in *Meadowlark West* and in the new pieces of the 1997 *Selected Poems,* a few of which we have already dealt with. Here, though, in its first appearance, this ecology is less concerned with the living flora and fauna of the world than with the earth's past, and with the prehistoric life of the people who inhabited it, as this can be gleaned from the artifacts which have survived them, primarily the polychrome cave paintings of the American west and pacific coast. "Redwood Highway," one of his longest poems, is the first piece to explore this complex of themes.

From the great laughter
This cage with the phlogistic eye of Bruno
With escape hatch of Ibn 'Arabi
Uncle Tom and silver wolves underneath amethyst
Doubled by acrobatic redwood trees sailing an ancient horn
Straddling wheat fields of your ear o mediums
The great laughter eternally turns crystal rays

I take the first phrase to mean, "I speak from the great laughter, animated by its spirit of dissent." For there is a great laughter of dissent, and it is perhaps the final expression of the moralist's disapproval and the philosopher's contempt. This, after all, is what Deleuze tells us in his book on Foucault, when he speaks of the latter's laughter which animated his writings with a dark splendor. The disapproval of our present speaker

is perhaps distantly related, since it is based on his evident knowledge of Eastern traditions as well as on Occidental ones, both showing up in numerous learned references. Knowledge of varied cultures, and of old cultures, gives him a distanced and disenchanted view of his own. He wishes to change it or to resurrect a different one, and so he puts on the persona of a magus, summoning his learning and his magic in order to do this. Yet it cannot be done alone, and so following this opening incantation there is a summoning of tutelary spirits: Giordano Bruno and the 13th century Andalusian gnostic Ibn Arabi. They embody the spirit of dissent, of imagining differently, which the speaker aspires to. From here the poem moves into an evocation of ancient powers congregating once again.

The powers from out there on the western horizon of Walpi
The San Francisco Peaks blowing their tops
Runners from the Chumash sprayed
Teleported
Over sierras hot lands deserts
 To the dancers
At the blazing mirrors the great laughter treads
With volcano of feverish diamond
Across the sleeping beauty
Morsels of luna embedded to dream

Thematically and stylistically the stanza is slightly reminiscent of "The Dance" section of *The Bridge*, though it is more disjunctive in its organization and perhaps more informed in its anthropology. Yet the disjunctiveness is more important than the anthropology, as important as that is, in giving Lamantia's lines their authentic feel. The interrupted grammar is a means of indicating the dispersed, fragmented nature of the culture the poet is attempting to summon, its state of being almost lost and so just barely recoverable by

the imagination. We might think that there is something too facile about Crane's lines by comparison, as beautiful as they are in their more conventional way. Yet beyond anthropology, or for that matter verse technique, there is a question of what will bring these remnants back to life. In a sense, there are two answers.

To desire
Desire's seashell dream
Far from this grovelling host fidgeting poisonous grates
Shamans at Mount Diablo touched by antlers of light
Invisible bears crowding the coast of almond shell vestments
I'm at the owl haunts of the sacral redwood grove…

Rose
Fire of sex
On the subterranean trunk
Water
 Woman's diamond fire
Whose center is the high beauty of her sleeping truth…

The fundamental motive for re-imagining our current life and culture is desire, understood in its deepest and broadest sense. This is what motivates dissent and draws one to positive alternatives. Yet the stanza contains a second answer too: participation. For it must be pointed out that the aboriginal cultures the poet finds himself drawn to are not dead but marginalized, pushed to the edge of the North American economy, and mostly excluded from its society at large. More than book learning, therefore, is required of the poet who must visit these communities and ask to be admitted to their company and then participate in their rituals if he is allowed. The story of this initiation and some of its results are dealt with in highly fragmented and elliptical ways at various points in

the poem and in other poems, as we have seen. Perhaps the most extensive description is found in this piece, however, in the middle section where we are given an account of one of these rituals and, in highly stylized fashion, some glimpses of the visions it induces, whether imagined, dreamed, or hallucinated:

> With an iron cloud
> plunging in a molten *phallicular*.
> With the molding sweathouses of the people above
> To keep memory of you Yurok of the north
> Albino deer dancers dream over Mount Shasta
> On these Ohlone shores of the central dream
> Moon dancing the sun
> Owl clothes wave from the weathers of your ear
> With the grizzly instudded in its mirror
> The fasting forest obsidian
> And concrete dream roads
> Dissolve against the grain
>
> Chance to dream wide awake
> With the antelope-necked tom-toms
> Whose sinews of silence project
> The perfect Edenic Reeunion…
>
> Antelope dream hoofs
> Vermillion sight
> Through waves of lemonade seas ah Charles Fourier…

And yet prior to this there is a somewhat different vision, described in startling images. We have seen it before:

> To be there
> When the cave's luminescence is fraught with killer fangs
> Curling stalagmites for a dinner of giants
> Porous cadavers lean from turrets
> Splash asian waters
> Trapped here in Lemuria
> The pink hoofs snarl

And part the sediments of a million years

Onto the ceiling the mole's absence
Inside the mountain's look of terror
The whirlpool entices to furious salt
Behind the trickling of sonorous bats
Murmuring minerals parade the air with magnets
Above the singular flight of toads
The meadow

The stanza describes entering a cave with a lantern in which there are rock paintings and various natural rock formations. At a certain point the lantern's light is dwarfed by the cave's size (it is large enough to have bats flying around), so that the light seems to be absorbed by the surrounding darkness and to be a feature of *it*, rather than of the lantern: it is the cave's luminescence which, in a beautiful choice of words, is "fraught" with killer fangs, shards of light slanting quiveringly down and around us. We are encompassed by a mysterious darkness, and one might easily imagine it to be eerie and threatening. Yet the speaker does not seem fearful but rather amazed and attentive. In this strange moment, the darkness seems to possess its own subtle luminosity, a diffused light which, in its tremors, brings darting jagged shapes into view here and there. These shapes are perhaps just rock formations or shadows caused by the light itself. It is a moment of wonder and of a poised and ongoing startlement: one seems to be witnessing the creation of something in a burgeoning space of terrestrial forms and presences, which yet are not living, though they are not dead either: they are that which informs life, causing it to take the shapes and patterns that it does, and which creates the context of its appearance. In a sense we witness the birth of the terrestrial as such. As we move further in, deeper and larger spaces appear as though in a vaulted emptiness. And yet there are unsettling presences too, now looming in an imposing way, seen more clearly, and thus seen as

more compellingly grotesque. One recalls the frightening presences that startle Wordsworth in the boat stealing episode of *The Prelude*. Like his huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men and which trouble his dreams, these shapes of stone seem to recall the human, though they are not themselves human nor direct representations of it. Then, suddenly, as though to break the awesome spell, the poet remarks in a playful touch that they splash waters that come all the way from Asia. This vision in the cave complements the previous hallucinogenic vision; it is its subterranean counterpart. In both cases the speaker seems to be witnessing something fundamental about the life of nature, which yet is accessible only to those who have distanced themselves from American culture with its preoccupations with ease and comfort and its relentless economic focus. And yet what is seen is stranger than any account we might give of it. The language matches this with its own strangeness, its swift changes of tone and register and its telegraphic rhythms. Yet one of the reasons for this strangeness is that what is revealed is neither nature nor art (as we usually think of it); neither is it an historical remains of some kind. For what in fact is known about these images? In the nature of things, what could be? Are they not unique in the true sense of the word? For there is no genre of "the cave painting." What confronts us is an enigma: mute with the historical silence surrounding it, and yet resonant in a special way, and for this very reason. The natural context is likewise mute and yet resonant: it prompts one to an intense watching -- rapt and wondering -- and yet it shows us nothing that we usually identify as nature, for there is nothing living. It is rather the ultimate singularity of the earth itself that is revealed.

THE BIRTH OF THE EVENT

Lyotard in *Libidinal Economy* recounts the pagan multiplication of deities -- one for every occasion, and thus one to summon to every occasion its specific and proper intensity. [*Libidinal Economy* 6] Yet this multiplication of deities, though it grants to the world an interest and fills it with singularities, seals it as well by that very means, seals it off, that is, from anything unforeseen, from the event as such. The world is filled with occasions, and the errand of living with the intensities these call forth, yet the event in its purest form is excluded. Is this not the paradox of the advent of Christianity, to bring the event of the world to the world, and thus of necessity from an "outside"? If the event is restored to the world, this must change the nature of the imperative of perception so that it no longer says, *this is: see, hear*. But rather, *this has never been before*. (Such is the underlying meaning of the Catholic idea of miracles.) Yet what is revealed in this way is always of the humblest: it is not gold which is multiplied but loaves of bread and dried fishes. It is the world itself, therefore, which is revealed, and not anything the world in its worldly activity, that is to say in its historical activity, brings forth. There is always a paradox therefore: the miraculous event reveals the world as such, and yet the world can never be known in its totality. It thus reveals what cannot be revealed and yet which is, understanding this word in both its auxiliary and in its intransitive senses: that which is revealed, for it is in front of me, confronting me, and that which is, unquestionably is, because, again, it faces me. (Perhaps these two senses are analogous to figure and ground,

respectively.) As Christianity fades it becomes the Church, and the Church is the home of the devil. What then can bring the event of the world to the world and to the inhabitants of the world, to the humans? (Animals being inhabitants not of the world but of the earth). The answer we know, and yet do not know: Romanticism, Marxism, ___ What name should now be placed on this line? Is it Surrealism? But is not Surrealism dead, or, worse, a topic for academic research? Yet the essential Surrealist insight is perhaps more relevant now than ever, for it was simply this: that appreciating the singularities of events understood against the background of the great singularity of the earth itself is to understand them analogically. For nothing is really *like* anything else, and at the same time there is no universal substrate out of which these various and innumerable events are fashioned; nevertheless, the uncanny resemblances, the echoes and sympathetic resonances between things, are an unavoidable fact which must be taken into account and allowed to resonate -- as it naturally does tend to do -- within the imagination. The thought of identity and also the thought of difference *both* founder when confronted with the sheer and concrete panorama of the world. If paganism, in its very readiness to acknowledge the uniqueness of mundane occasions, had blinded itself to nothing other than the event, the mathematical sciences of nature have done the same, though by other means, and for a different reason, that of universal calculability. Yet a world sealed off from the unforeseen is ultimately impoverished and tends to become lifeless in the imagination. Perhaps it is for this reason that the poet had his (evidently brief) Catholic phase. The Christian mythology provides the conceptual framework for imagining the unique, the incomensurable, the incomparable. In addition, this vision of the marvelous

(not of the Christian per se) is the more urgently needed in the context of post-war American culture, with its push toward universal standardization.

Of course, theorizing the event had always been a fundamental Surrealist preoccupation. How can one create something that might break through the interpreted world of the bourgeoisie? It was sought and found in the numinous beauty of chance encounters, in the strange allure or in the forbidding self-sufficiency of unusual objects, in the inexplicable associations of dreams, and in the transports of the erotic. Occasionally it was found in the natural world. Yet in all these encounters with the marvelous there is something more or something other: there is an extra, a surplus hidden somewhere in love, a surplus, an unforeseen hidden somewhere in dreams, as likewise in the secret processes of nature, something which the very focus on the topic at hand -- love, the dream, nature -- will not let emerge into full awareness. There is thus a more primitive experience which prompts the analogical approach in the first place and provides its motive and its ultimate justification. It is perhaps the sense of the inexplicable, of change itself in its incipience, and of an otherness burgeoning within experiences which are yet pure *thises* and not really comparable to anything else but which yet in their very power press the parallels, the echoes, the resemblances between different and disparate things forcibly upon the mind. In the process they lure one beyond themselves with a beckoning toward new valuations, new perceptions which yet are limit experiences for reason as it defines itself against an otherness to the human and against the fundamental limits imposed by time and space. As presented here, these experiences are mostly those of an isolated speaker. Yet the forms of imagination they initiate receive their further development only socially, and so they limn the outer boundary of what

Lacan would call the Symbolic. Perhaps indeed there is an ultimate *ecart* between humans and the world in the sense that these events are always left somewhat mute behind their very uniqueness, and seem to communicate with themselves among occult pathways and with us by mere manifestation. The natural and cultural world they suggest is therefore multiple: the world has no single shape, no single description, no single history, and likewise it has no center. This does not mean that it is chaotic. Quite the opposite: its orders and its haunting enigmas cannot be denied, but neither are they amenable to ultimate explication.

NOTES

1 The concept of perceptual levels is explicated by Alphonso Lingis in *The Imperative*, building upon themes in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. See *The Imperative*, 25-38

2 See *Totality and Infinity*, 33-52.

3 See Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*.

4 *Andre Breton*, 102-124.

CONCLUSION: THE PEOPLE TO COME

THE QUESTION OF SURREALISM

> In surrealism we find an artistic style which continually attempts to exceed itself, to violate its own rules and to reformulate them in relation to an ever-receding boundary. In this sense it is like subjectivity itself, and its expressions have perhaps had something of that fluidity and formlessness, or rather they have been marked by a continual questioning of form and a cultivated ambiguity of expression: a flight toward and yet away from meaning, a flight to and yet away from figuration. These flights enact a continual escape, a continual leaking of textual space and of formal economy and produce a superabundance of images and of words -- chains of epithets and images, fluid and musical harmonies of phrases and clauses, and sequences of dream-like events which capture the dream, or what we take to be the dream, fixing it against the surface of the world, even as on the surface of the page or the canvas. As a consequence where is the world itself? Found ? Or forgotten?

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze demonstrates that Aristotelian and most traditional ontology creates a conceptual schema in which no place is left for difference, except as breakage or fissure:

In the concept of reflection, difference testifies to its full submission to all the requirements of representation, which becomes thereby 'organic representation.' In the concept of reflection, mediating and mediated difference is in effect fully subject to the identity of the concept, the opposition of predicates, the analogy of judgment and the resemblance of perception. Here we discover the necessarily quadripartite character of representation. The question is to know whether, under all these reflexive aspects,

difference does not lose both its own concept and its own reality. In effect, difference ceases to be reflexive and recovers an effectively real concept only to the extent that it designates catastrophes: either breaks of continuity in the series of resemblances or impassible fissures between the analogical structures. It ceases to be reflexive only in order to become catastrophic. But does not difference as catastrophe precisely bear witness to an irreducible ground which continues to act under the apparent equilibrium of organic representation? [34-35]

In the ontology of Duns Scotus, however, he finds a way for the multiplicity of existents to enjoy an equal dignity within the realm of Being, thought now in terms of a hierarchy which yet grants a full and strangely Nietzschean power to what it orders. It is perhaps a small and scholastic change, yet it brings a new universe of power and process into view:

> No doubt there is still hierarchy and distribution in univocal being, in relation to the individuating factors and their sense, but distribution and even hierarchy have two completely different, irreconcilable acceptations. Similarly for the expressions logos and *nomos*, in so far as these refer to problems of distribution. We must first distinguish a type of distribution which implies a dividing up of that which is distributed: it is a matter of dividing up the distributed as such. It is here that in judgment the rules of analogy are all-powerful. In so far as common sense and good sense are qualities of judgment, these are presented as principles of division which declare themselves *the best distributed*. A distribution of this type proceeds by fixed and proportional determinations which may be assimilated to 'properties' or limited territories within representation. The agrarian question may well have been very important for this organization of judgment as the faculty which distinguishes parts ('on the one hand and on the other hand'). Even among the gods, each has his domain, his category, his attributes, and all distribute limits and lots to mortals in accordance with destiny. Then there is a completely other distribution which must be called nomadic, a nomad *nomos*, without property, enclosure or measure. Here, there is no longer

a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute themselves in an open space – a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits. Nothing pertains or belongs to any person, but all persons are arrayed here and there in such a manner as to cover the largest possible space. Even when it concerns the serious business of life, it is more like a space of play, or a rule of play, by contrast with sedentary space and *nomos.* To fill a space, to be distributed within it, is very different from distributing the space. It is an errant and even 'delirious' distribution, in which things are deployed across the entire extensity of a univocal and undistributed Being. It is not a matter of being which is distributed according to the requirements of representation, but of all things being divided up within being in the univocity of simple presence (the One – All).

Such a distribution is demonic rather than divine, since it is a peculiarity of demons to operate in the intervals between the gods' fields of action, as it is to leap over the barriers of the enclosures, thereby confounding the boundaries between properties. Oedipus' chorus cries: 'Which demon has leapt further than the longest leap?' The leap here bears witness to the unsettling difficulties that nomadic distributions introduce into the sedentary structures of representation. The same goes for hierarchy. There is a hierarchy which measures beings according to their limits, and according to their degree of proximity or distance from a principle. But there is also a hierarchy which considers things and beings from the point of view of power: it is not a question of considering absolute degrees of power, but only of knowing whether a being eventually 'leaps over' or transcends its limits in going to the limit of what it can do, whatever its degree. 'To the limit', it will be argued, still presupposes a limit. Here, limit [*peras*] no longer refers to what maintains the thing under a law, nor to what delimits or separates it from other things. On the contrary, it refers to that on the basis of which it is deployed and deploys all its power; hubris ceases to be simply condemnable and *the smallest becomes equivalent to the largest* once it is not separated from what it can do. This enveloping measure is the same for all things, the same also for substance, quality, quantity, etc., since it forms a single maximum at which the developed diversity of all degrees touches the equality which envelops them. This ontological measure is closer to the immeasurable state of things than to the first kind of measure; this ontological hierarchy is closer to the hubris

> and anarchy of beings than to the first hierarchy. It is the monster which combines all the demons. The words 'everything is equal' may therefore resound joyfully, on condition that they are said *of* that which is not equal in this equal, univocal Being: equal being is immediately present in everything, without mediation or intermediary, even though things reside unequally in this equal being. There, however, where they are borne by hubris, all things are in absolute proximity, and whether they are large or small, inferior or superior, none of them participates more or less in being, nor receives it by analogy. Univocity of being thus also signifies equality of being. Univocal being is at one and the same time nomadic distribution and crowned anarchy. [36-37]

This is nothing other than the obverse of Levinas' *il y a* mentioned at the outset of this study; it is its daylight version. It is also the positive vision of Surrealism in its original conception as pioneered by Breton and his colleagues. Yet Surrealism could release this crowned anarchy only by means of its own ruptures, its own fissures, its own disjunctive leaps from image to image, its folding of context into context, and its warping of space and time in the peculiar and organically inflected science fiction which is its special signature. Through these ruptures, the catastrophic discourses of Surrealism give us glimpses of the Real, yet the continuing excess of invention which is the vehicle for these very ruptures promotes an always ensuing obscurity: there are always further words, further images and figures to interpret, and in the best work they come always too fast and are always too many. Moreover, the textuality of these images -- their fabrication out of a complex rhetoric and a self-aware, self-echoing style -- is itself a deliberately confusing labyrinth populated by echoes and auras -- the silent echoes of printed words and the chimerical phantoms of quasi-pictorial harmonies -- which lead the ear, the eye, and the mind always elsewhere (though never far enough perhaps). These written figures produce a dazzling illumination of a peculiar kind, a crossing or a confusion of senses

and of faculties, as out of the congregating and yet discreet signifiers which words are there streams the light and color of an elaborate and splendid style, at once animated and frozen, fixed in its haunted archaic, its would-be outrage. Here dream and description intrude upon each other, as do symbol and sign. Natural signs, the traces of the visibility of the world, are eventually reinstated, recaptured, in the text, and remarkably so, but only as a response to what we might guess is a kind of crisis. Even so, is it by chance that the literary seems to recede before the pressure of fact and to become curiously reportorial? Perhaps it does not become diluted but merely different, and we therefore witness poetry changing its outward appearance once again, disguising itself as natural history in *Arcanum 17*, as case study *Nadja*, or, in Lamantia, as ornithology and anthropology. As a response one might say that even here in its less intense modes, the self-exceeding and continual questing of the surrealist style solicits the very idea of genre. Even when a given one is used, disruptive elements are included: the gnomic, the epigrammatic, the quasi rebus of words and dreams, the convulsive and the scatological, indeed the unclassifiable itself, manifest in the form of texts which are neither verse nor prose, neither poem nor *recit.* And yet it may be that this change, this turn toward the world, though motivated by the imperative perception itself, is yet a falling off in power and to some extent self-defeating, that the world is best grasped through its inner powers rather than through its external appearances. It may also be that the means of doing this is in fact analogy.

Yet we must understand analogy as the means by which the unlike as well as the like is brought to perception and to understanding. Thus, though the power of the analogical motivates the flight of associations, the flight is yet a flight, and the surrealist

elan cannot be accounted for by referring to a governing power of the Same. It is fundamentally other, and in fact a power of chaos. The very anarchy of associations brings forward both similitude and difference equally, congruity and incongruity and without preference and likewise without domesticating difference beneath the roof of the Same. An infinite curve of divergences -- shown precisely in the difference between each individual image and every other one, each particular metaphor and every other, each phrase and every other phrase -- destroys the power of the Same, as likewise that of the One. Perhaps, therefore, because of its concreteness, its cinema, and indeed its complex textuality, it is granted to poetry, and specifically to this poetry, to accomplish what Deleuze feels has been denied to philosophy, (or which it has denied itself) -- to make difference appear in conjunction with similitude, though not subordinated to it. And yet contrary to what Deleuze seems to have thought possible, this is accomplished by means of the analogical.

Surrealism then is an access to the full power of the analogical which results in an opening toward infinite chains of resemblance, of near-resemblance, partial resemblance, and non-resemblance. The result is the adequate representation of the crowned anarchy Deleuze himself speaks of. Yet this form of representation rather than constraining such anarchy is the means by which it is made present to the mind. This crowning of anarchy results, in fact, in the very reign of the analogical: similitude and difference both come forth in the echo, the resemblance, the affinity among natural kinds, the fundamental images and presences of the earth -- the veritable archetypes -- which yet despite all resemblances remain always singular, unique, and divergent from each other and from themselves. They diverge from themselves and from each other by a molecular

seething of incompossibles creating unique and incommensurable existents which can be related to each other, turned toward each other, only through an analogical leap. Indeed one might come to feel, after extensive consideration of the surrealist style, that the ultimate manifestation of the Same is not similarity as such but rather the vision of a universal economics -- whether this be conceived in terms of Matter, Energy, Capital, or Deleuze's own Univocity of Being. Surrealism, therefore, must be seen as the means of overcoming the economic in favor of the analogical, and yet it is a rebellious analogical only loosely in touch with reason in so far as reason is thought of as the rule of the Same, the classical principles of sufficient reason, or the ancient Logos, against all of which it enacts a kind of satyr play. In this play, King analogue reigns, along with his queen the image, her panoply and raiment creating not only her very body (which she reveals shamelessly and continually) but the body of the world. Yet our witnessing, our imaginative grasp, indeed our love of this very body is itself a gnosis and an initiation, and not a mere looking, and so it requires a metaphysical alertness in us as readers, as in the writer. It is not, therefore, a mere unreason but a more-than-reason and in fact a revolutionary gnosis. We ourselves become Prince Liberty, for this knowing is the beginning of freedom. To see differently is to begin to be differently.

CULTURAL DISSIDENCE

And yet what is cultural dissidence? It must be the act of bringing unfamiliar ways of thinking, and yet more importantly, of feeling, of imagining, into a given society. Surrealism, in fact, always thought of itself as a type of dissidence, the textual

manifestation of a total revolution in awareness and culture. The deeper historical reasons for this become clearer if we consider the interpretation of modern society which Deleuze and Guattari propose in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Here the free transformation of libidinal processes is seen as inherently resistant to capitalist orderings, and therefore these impulses are continually being brought back under control by an array of re-coding systems, chief among them psychoanalysis and the family. It is a familiar image: society is a battleground in which the forces of the political economy attempt to impose fixed definitions and constraints on the restive powers of the body itself. What are the relations between this history (which is certainly true) and the specific styles of art that mark out cultural history? Guattari himself makes an interesting connection between this combined process of semiotic flux and reactive re-coding and the Baroque style proper in which he seems to see reactionary cultural forces as themselves partially productive, though not intentionally so, of the conditions needed for the glories of the Baroque as we know it. Reaction itself can contribute, indirectly, to creation.[*Guattari Reader* 141-147]Yet whatever the relationship might be between this larger historical process and the genesis of broad cultural movements developing at large, it seems reasonable to say that the manifold attempts to reassert control over desire have always had the goal, *with respect to the individual*, of establishing what Guattari elsewhere refers to as "semiological enslavement," the complete imaginative subordination of the individual to the received order. Surrealism, an extremely late development after all, perhaps a desperate one, revisits one of the fundamental sites of contestation in society -- the imagination -- and explicitly recognizes it *as a site of contestation*. The surrealist technique of disorientation, its habit of folding one image context into another, attempts to return the power of

decoded flows back to the individual in order to give him or her a means of resisting this subjection.

THE PEOPLE TO COME

Lamantia writes no ethnic poetry. One might say that he came before the movement toward ethnic awareness and the deliberate fostering of ethnic expression in our literature, and yet Ginsberg writes in the full consciousness of his own Jewish identity, celebrates it in his peculiar way, and uses it as a point of departure and return in the context of a poetry as varied, complex, and cosmopolitan as Lamantia's. Yet in the latter's work ethnicity is hidden, transcended in the direction of the universalizing vision which Surrealism proposed, at least as expounded by Breton and as embodied in Breton's works themselves. As Anna Balakian points out, Breton had little use for narrow nationalisms whether in art or in politics, and his native region of Brittany does not figure in his work in any particular way. He did not take the route of Nerval before him or of Char after him and celebrate the local, the regional, and hence the limited. He sought the unlimited -- the unlimited reach of meaning as it extends itself in a chain of analogies and images, the unlimited search for what one might think, might feel, might see and know, the questioning of what one is and might become, unlimited by considerations of utility or ideology. It is strange that his work has not received more attention in the United State than it has, for there is an admirable anarchism in all his disdain for boundaries and limits

which should have had a wide resonance in American culture. It is here perhaps that we see a point of intersection between the work and career of Breton and that of Lamantia. For it is certainly the case that the latter inaugurates his entire project under the terms inherited from his great French predecessor and sponsor. Yet where does the quest for the marvelous lead in the United States, in the 1950s? the1960s? the 1970s? There is first a narrow context of limit and constraint, then an opening and an expansion which seemed to promise so much, perhaps too much; and then a collapse. Will there ever be anything different?

Yet it is not merely the foreign and perhaps the exotic influence of Breton and Surrealism. There is the native one of Crane and the aesthetic of excess which he, perhaps more than any other poet, pioneered in American literature. In him we see the charged and expressionistic relation to poetic language which seems to break with the native bias toward realism in favor of a high-keyed musicality, at once ecstatic and declamatory, a restless movement of figures in which metaphors and images fuse and coalesce, split apart and rejoin in a continuous overreaching of meaning, a pushing of analogical significance further and yet still further. There is something inescapably Promethean in this project, involving as it does the movement of human expression past its accepted limits. In Lamantia's case this leads from the vision of erotic union with the Other, thought in terms of an actual woman, to considerations of the libidinal body itself in its simultaneous pressure and elusiveness -- its continuous pressure on expression and its continual eluding of clear and definitive representation. This is explored in an indirect way through the complexities of a baroque style. Yet this movement beyond normal expression and the normal limits of typical and "safe" experience leads to a vision of a

complete surpassing of the everyday self and in the direction of union with the otherness of nature, and so eventually with death. Yet there are always limits; affirmation itself reaches an end in the gnostic vision of the world as excremental dross. Language itself undergoes an extension of its capacity to convey meaning and courts deliberate breakdown. As in Crane, this leads to a kind of sparagmos, a rending of both language and the individual psyche. In such a state the world and the self appear as a radical fallenness, which perhaps they are. Crane finds his gnostic hell in the Carib Isle where the tarantula rattles at the lily's foot. Lamantia, though he repeats Artaud's journey to Mexico, yet experiences his ultimate alienation in the context of post-war American society and its economic and social structures, indeed even its physical infrastructure, which appear as arid, labyrinthine, and dehumanized. In this way, he fuses the gnostic dissent from the created world with political dissent from a given regime and economic order.

There is therefore a flight, a line of flight away from the oppressive society with its relentless economic calculation and toward the fabled elsewhere. The initial solution is the false haven of drugs, yet this response is itself part of the descent into the infernal. Like the disciplinary society itself, it leads to the white wall of semiological enslavement, the paralysis -- creative, emotional, physical -- that results from the complete over-determination of the subject by an encompassing regime of quantification -- by an economics in the crudest sense (and yet, it there a subtle economics?). It is the experience of this paralysis which leads to the repeated presence in the poetry of images of blankness and occlusion, the space of white marble which is, oddly, the Mexican night, or likewise images of stone, paralysis, and astonishment. It is significant, however, that

this line of flight leads to such an impasse. One seeks the elsewhere, yet one is in America -- the elsewhere is everywhere. Where is there an outside to the regime which itself continually pushes back against its own boundaries, as we are told it is the nature of late capitalism to do?

There is a need, therefore, to find a place in which the fundamental realities of nature and the world can be encountered directly and truthfully. And yet this places new and special demands on writing and writer. The first is a change of style, a movement away from the surrealist dream and toward more realistic description, a re-orientation toward the visible world and toward others as well. The earliest manifestation of this is, surprisingly, an involvement with a church, universal and catholic. This becomes the occasion for ecstatic moments, irreducible in their unique intensity and in their nature incommensurable -- lived singularities that yet in their very uniqueness and otherworldly orientation are not shareable. One is lead then, in continuing search, to the rituals of native peoples which teach one the nature of a belonging and a dwelling on the earth. Perhaps in view of this Lamantia did write ethnic poetry after all, for here, in this work, the *ethnos* is redefined as the context in which one participates in a learning and a remembering with others, concrete and performative in character, which teaches one the nature of the real and the place of human beings in the order of the cosmos.

This process, involving what we might think of as a limiting or chastening of style and an attunement of oneself toward the mutuality of group participation, is itself the result of an exceeding or a movement past a limit. In this case, however, it is one which originates from outside the subject. It comes in the form of the imperative perception, the unavoidable solicitation and demand which the world imposes upon the embodied human

person -- upon eyes of flesh which must see as eyes of flesh do see, upon the body which must feel the earth, the wind, the water as a body does and must, this body which is itself a product of these same elements. This then becomes the final word, so far, in an on-going and complex project: a vision of equilibrium between self and others and, more importantly, between humans and the world.

Lamantia's position in American poetry remains peculiar. As an Italian writer working in largely French models, writing in English, and living on the edge of North America, he is irremediably other, foreign, and unclassifiable. His work, inheriting a complex and exotic style, pushes language to a limit, or to various limits, and seems at times chaotic and impenetrable. Yet it gives evidence of a desire to create a radical idiom by which to enact an almost total criticism of the culture in which, by a strange historical chance, he found himself, and to do this by a continual exceeding of stylistic and conceptual boundaries. Yet perhaps the stylistic daring and metaphysical quest of Surrealism is only possible among a people and in a culture not entirely caught up in economic calculation. Where will such people be found, and how will they construct such a culture? It seems to me that this is the final question of his work.

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